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Some Hard Questions for People Who Drink

“To drink or not to drink?” About 30 percent of Americans never ask that question because they are abstainers. The other 70 percent are drinkers, ranging from once-a-year drinkers to chronic alcoholics. They have other questions.

When to say when? they wonder, as they pour. How much is safe? or how much is too much?

How they phrase their questions tells you something about their drinking. Reasonable people ask: How much is safe? Alcoholics, on the other hand, avoid the chaser and cut right to the hard core?: How much can I drink without having serious damage?

HOW MUCH SHOULD I DRINK?

The upper limit of moderate drinking for an average-sized man is 1-1/2 ounces of pure alcohol per day. (That’s the amount contained in two bottles of beer, two glasses of wine or two 1-1/4 ounce drinks of 100-proof whiskey.) For women, the amount is half the amount for men. Why? Because alcohol is dissolved in the watery tissues of the body like blood and muscle, of which women have less; and it is not dissolved in fat tissue, of which women have more. As a result, if a man and a woman of equal body weight go drink for drink, the woman will be drunker quicker, and damage her body organs more seriously because her blood/brain alcohol concentration will rise higher – from the same amount of drinking.

This safe drinking limit, based on current research, actually dates back to 1862 when Sir Francis Anstie announced what became known as “Anstie’s Law of Safe Drinking.” (Anstie was a British psychiatrist, renowned in academic and research circles.)

HOW SHOULD I DRINK?

Once you know how much to drink, the next question is: How to drink? Social drinking means sipping – not gulping. Gulping, especially on an empty stomach, produces a sudden rise in blood alcohol concentration that is felt as a “rush” or “high.” The reason is that 20 percent of the alcohol is absorbed directly from the stomach into the blood stream and the brain – without the delay, dilution and digestion that take place further down stream, in the small intestine.

To minimize such rapid absorption of alcohol, you should have food in your stomach, and dilute your liquor with ice or water; or dilute your wine with soda to make a “spritzer.”

WHEN, WHERE & WITH WHOM SHOULD I DRINK?

Since alcohol affects how we feel, it is not a good idea to drink when we feel lonely, depressed, disappointed or angry. (Alcohol makes all of these worse.) And since alcohol affects how we function, the time to drink alcohol is when we won’t need our brain to do anything that is mentally or physically complex, such as drive a car, balance a checkbook, perform surgery or conduct a symphony.

(To get the gist of this question, ask yourself this question: Would I want my surgeon to drink while he/she is operating on me? Would my surgeon want me to drink while I’m preparing his income tax return, or reading her Pap smear for cervical cancer.)

Social drinking is done in a relaxed setting with friends when you’re having a meal, shooting the breeze, re-living old times or celebrating a special event.

With whom should we drink? Ah, that is a crucial question. Since drinking makes a person not only relaxed but also vulnerable and –depending on their personality type – inclined to gossip, hurtful teasing, sexual advances or worse, we should select our drinking companions carefully. (Morning after excuses, such as “I didn’t really mean it” or “I can’t remember anything” seldom square things away.)

A handy guide is to listen to how drinkers refer to their friends. Social drinkers have good buddies – alcoholics have drinking buddies. In other words, do your friends meet to be social – or do they meet to get drunk? Also, observe the people whom you are about to join for a drink. Are they civil, happy, enjoying each other’s company and sipping drinks? Or are they loud, competitive, argumentative and getting drunk?

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