

Alcohol : gay men, sex and drugs / Terrence Higgins Trust.

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Gay men, sex and drugs

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WHAT'S THE SCORE?

Alcohol is also known as: booze, drink; in America liquor and in Australia grog.

Booze is the oldest and most widely used drug in the UK. It's a mood changing drug and a depressant, meaning it slows your body and its functions down - but in small doses it acts as a stimulant.

TAKING ALCOHOL

Alcohol is made when sugar and other carbohydrates ferment (usually with the help of yeast). Booze can be made from grains (eg. barley makes whiskey, hops make beer, rye makes vodka), fruits (grapes make wine, apples make cider) or vegetables (potatoes make vodka). Its effects are stronger on an empty stomach. Mixing different types of drink gets you more drunk and ends in a worse hangover.

HIGHS AND LOWS

Alcohol heightens your mood, making you happier or more affectionate if you feel that way already. It can relax you, lower your inhibitions, and make you more sociable and confident. If your mood's low, alcohol can make it lower. It's well known for causing aggression. When booze lowers inhibitions, it can put you at risk of harm and affect your judgement.

Because it's a depressant alcohol slows down your body's reactions, causing slurred speech, lack of co-ordination, blurred vision, sleepiness or passing out. Other unwelcome effects are throwing up and dehydration (not enough water in the body - the main cause of hangovers). Higher doses cause blackouts (not being able to remember what happened) and very high doses can lead to alcohol poisoning, which can kill.

A LONG TERM RELATIONSHIP?

Alcohol is a low level toxin (the reason it damages the heart and liver in heavy drinkers and why pregnant women shouldn't drink).

Heavy drinking over a long time can lead to problem drinking, liver disease, cancers (of the throat, mouth and liver) and brain damage. Excessive drinking kills thousands each year.

Addiction to alcohol can be physical (the 'shakes' are a withdrawal symptom) or psychological (giving you an intense urge to keep drinking).

ALCOHOL WITH OTHER DRUGS

Depressants – because alcohol's a depressant drug, mixing it with other depressants like GHB, ketamine or tranquilisers (like Valium) can make you pass out or interfere with your breathing or heart (which can kill). GHB-related overdoses and deaths often involve alcohol; it's risky to take GHB with booze in your system from drinking earlier.

Ecstasy – booze deadens the effects of E and together both can dangerously dehydrate the body. E-related deaths often involve alcohol.

Cocaine – in the body alcohol combines with cocaine to make cocaethylene, which can make the effects of the coke stronger and is a toxin that damages the brain, heart and liver. Mixing the two increases the harm done by both drugs. There's a bigger risk of sudden death when people use cocaine and alcohol together.

HIV drugs – there are no significant bad reactions with alcohol, but if booze makes you throw up within an hour of taking HIV medication, the dose should be taken again.

As booze often causes vomiting, mixing it with other drugs carries the risk of choking on vomit if you fall unconscious.

USEFUL TO KNOW

Drinking water between drinks and/or before sleeping cuts down on dehydration and hangover symptoms.

Alcohol can make anxiety, depression or sleep problems worse, so should be treated with caution if you're vulnerable to these.

Coffee can't sober you up. Only alcohol leaving your system over time does this.

THE LAW

To buy alcohol you must be 18 or over. If 16-17 you can have it bought for you if ordering food and with an adult. It's against the law to sell alcohol to someone who's drunk.

The UK legal limit for drinking and driving is 80 milligrams of alcohol per 100 millilitres of blood. The penalty for driving over the limit can be a one year driving ban, fine of up to £5,000 or a prison sentence of up to six months. Causing death by dangerous driving can lead to 14 years in prison and a two year driving ban. A drink driving endorsement will stay on your drivers licence for 11 years.

Two pints of normal strength lager or one large glass of wine are enough to put someone over the limit.

Government guidelines for men are 3-4 'units' (not drinks) a day (21 units a week).

1 pint of strong lager/cider =	3 units
1 alcopop =	1.5 units
1 small glass of wine =	2 units
1 can of strong lager =	over 2 units
1 double measure of spirits =	2 units

SEX AND ALCOHOL

Alcohol can lower your inhibitions and make you feel horny and sexually confident. It can also make people less uptight, more affectionate or sexually assertive and experimental.

The numbing effect of booze can make it harder to come and drinking can stop you getting a hard-on. Heavy drinkers can lose both their sex drive and ability to get erections.

As drink affects people's judgement it might make them more likely to take risks during sex, including getting or passing on HIV. Booze can stop you being in control of what you do sexually – or mean you can't remember afterwards what sex you had.



MORE INFO

If you'd like to talk to someone with lots of experience of alcohol and drug-related issues, there's:

One-2-One counselling with a drugs counsellor at **Terrence Higgins Trust's** London offices. It's **free** of charge and to see if this would be useful for you, call our **Wellbeing Service** on **0207 812 1777**.

Or you can ask one of the **LADS** outreach team (identifiable in venues and cruising areas by their LADS stand, t-shirts and ID badges) about speaking to our drugs worker.

Also, check out www.tht.org.uk / **DRUG F*CKED**

Antidote

A London service gay and bisexual men concerned about their alcohol or drug use can make use of, with weekly drop-in, one-to-one counselling, support groups and more. Call **020 7287 8743** or go to www.thehungerford.org/antidote.asp

Talk To Frank

Information and support around alcohol and drug use. Call the 24 hour helpline on **0800 77 66 00** or contact by email, details from their website. Also, check out the 'need help' section of the site, www.talktofrank.com

Drinkline

A free, confidential helpline offering help and support around your drinking or someone else's **0800 917 8282** (9am-11pm weekdays).