

Alcohol Use in College

For many students, going away to college is the point in life when they begin the experience of making their own decisions about their life on a day-to-day basis. There are many fewer constraints on choices, and, without parents nearby to enforce their rules, adverse consequences often appear to be remote or nonexistent. It is not surprising that college is a time of personal experimentation in many areas of behavior. In fact, much of the personal growth that occurs during the college years occurs outside of the classroom, through this process of experimentation.

Patterns of Alcohol Use in College

One area where students have the opportunity to experiment is with their use of alcohol. Though colleges do not endorse drinking for students under the legal drinking age, students find ways to access alcohol. Nationally, a very large majority, about 80 percent, of college students use alcohol. The research on college student drinking is interesting in that it shows that more than 70 percent of college students report that when they drink, they drink four or fewer drinks on any one occasion of drinking. This is of importance for at least two reasons. The first is that it points to the fact that a very significant majority of students drink moderately, if at all. Secondly, it is notable that so many students select a level of drinking which places them within a comparatively safe range, since other independent research has shown that people who drink fewer than five drinks on any occasion are much less likely to find themselves in trouble because of their drinking than people who drink five or more drinks. Presumably this relates to the general level of intoxication where judgment is so clouded that people make poor choices. It is also true that between 25 and 30 percent of college students drink alcohol at a level that is regarded as problematic in the general population. Were they to continue drinking at this level in the longer term, they would be regarded as alcoholic. Fortunately, about two-thirds of the students who drink at this level have reduced their drinking significantly within months or years of leaving college. The remaining one-third (of the 25 to 30 percent who drink at this level) continues drinking and is subject to all of the many problems associated with long-term alcohol misuse. Unfortunately, it is not possible to distinguish clearly

between those students whose drinking is a short-term part of their college experience, and those who will go on to struggle with the problems of alcoholism. Therefore, it probably is most accurate to say that heavy drinking in college is a risk factor for the development of alcoholism in later life, although it is a precursor of alcoholism for only a small number of the students who drink in this fashion: probably about 9 percent of all college students. Obviously, this is a significant concern, as it produces the risk of a very significant life problem.

Harm Reduction

In reality, the risks for most college students are not from the drinking, per se, but from the physical and legal/administrative risks which can occur as a consequence of the circumstances of the drinking. If you are among the students who already are using or expecting to be using alcohol, it is desirable to be aware of some of the facts relating to its use, so that you are in the best position to make informed judgments. The purpose of this discussion is to raise issues and provide information to consider. As you weigh the facts and make your judgments, a major goal to keep in mind is to minimize the risks to yourself, both physical risks and risks to your good standing as a student and as a good citizen. The range of potential risk is enormous, going from mild (e.g., hangover symptoms or a single missed class or assignment) to very severe (e.g., serious accidental injury or death). Yet, even at the relatively mild end of the continuum, alcohol related problems can lead to prolonged aggravation and expense. In this sense, a thoughtful student might think about their plans for using alcohol with an eye on “harm reduction strategies.” If you are going to choose to use alcohol, as most students do, you can choose to do so in ways which are calculated to reduce the risks to you. Nothing will eliminate the risk entirely, but certain calculations will diminish the risk to more acceptable levels.

First, it is clear that for most college students, those under twenty-one, the possession and use of alcohol are illegal and involve a risk of criminal prosecution. In fact, about 40 percent of college students face disciplinary action for their use of an illegal substance (primarily alcohol) at some point in their college career. Fortunately, for most, this is a one-time event only, which does not lead to any enduring consequences. For some, however, the administrative or legal consequences can be severe and even life altering. To avoid this sort of difficulty, you will

need to make choices about when, where and with whom you will drink, as well as about the amount you will drink. Here are some points to keep in mind.

- Drinking with people who drink very heavily themselves, and who are likely to be pressuring about how much others should drink, is likely to be risky.
- Drinking in loud social settings with many drinkers tends to invite legal/administrative attention.
- Drinking with people you do not know well, especially when you are unaccompanied by a trusted friend is very risky. In fact, it probably should be a basic rule that you will not enter any drinking social event unless you and at least one friend have agreed to look after each other and to stay in close contact.
- Moderating how much you drink is very important.

Gender and Size as Factors Influencing Blood Alcohol Concentration

Size influences alcohol tolerance, such that smaller people have less tolerance than larger people. Gender is also a significant influence. A woman drinking an equal amount of alcohol in the same period of time as a man of an equivalent weight may have a higher blood alcohol level than that man. The gender difference is due to metabolic differences in how the body processes alcohol. Women must exercise particular restraint if they are to achieve moderate alcohol consumption.

For most people, drinking about one drink an hour can be considered to be a good target to maintain safe, low risk levels of consumption. This is the rate at which most people's bodies can metabolize alcohol. It should be noted that "one drink" refers to 1 1/2 ounces of liquor, 12 ounces of beer or 5 ounces of wine; these all contain approximately the same amount of alcohol, and usually are referred to as a "standard drink."

Driving

According to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, a driver's ability to divide attention between two or more sources of visual information can be impaired by BACs [BAC =

Blood Alcohol Concentration] of .02 percent or lower. Two drinks in one hour would make most males and females exceed .02. At BAC of .05 percent or more impairment occurs consistently in eye movements, glare resistance, visual perception, reaction time, certain types of steering tasks, information processing, and other aspects of psychomotor performance. Thus, driving safety is decreased even by a very low level of alcohol consumption.

Blood Alcohol Concentration

The following information is provided to give you some frame of reference for judging the effect that a given level of blood alcohol will produce in a person's behavior.

	Weight in Pounds							
Drinks	100	120	140	160	180	200	220	240
0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
1	.04	.03	.03	.02	.02	.02	.02	.02
2	.08	.06	.05	.05	.04	.04	.03	.03
3	.11	.09	.08	.07	.06	.06	.05	.05
4	.15	.12	.11	.09	.08	.08	.07	.06
5	.19	.16	.13	.12	.11	.09	.09	.08
6	.23	.19	.16	.14	.13	.11	.10	.09

Table 1: Blood Alcohol Concentration Chart for Men*

*Subtract .01% for each 40 minutes of drinking. One drink is 1.25 oz. of 80 proof liquor, 12 oz. of beer, or 5 oz. of table wine.

	Weight in Pounds							
Drink	100	120	140	160	180	200	220	240
0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
1	.05	.05	.04	.03	.03	.03	.02	.02
2	.10	.09	.08	.07	.06	.05	.05	.04
3	.15	.14	.11	.10	.09	.08	.07	.06
4	.20	.18	.15	.13	.11	.10	.09	.08
5	.25	.23	.19	.16	.14	.13	.11	.10
6	.30	.27	.23	.19	.17	.15	.14	.12

Table 2: Blood Alcohol Concentration Chart for Women*

*Subtract .01% for each 40 minutes of drinking. One drink is 1.25 oz. of 80 proof liquor, 12 oz. of beer, or 5 oz. of

table wine.

For More Information

The Union College Counseling Center offers caring, confidential help from psychologists experienced in helping students deal with alcohol related concerns. Call (518) 388-6161 or stop by the Wicker Wellness Center front desk to schedule an appointment.