

# Alcohol – Do you know the facts?

## What is alcohol?

All types of alcoholic drinks (beer, ciders, wine or spirits such as brandy or whisky) contain a potent chemical called ethyl alcohol. This chemical is formed when yeast is added to a fruit juice (usually crushed grapes) to produce wine.

More potent beverages such as brandy, vodka, rum or whisky are made by distilling wine. This means that the wine is heated and some of the water removed from the mixture so that more ethyl alcohol remains. The sharp taste and smell of alcoholic beverages is that of ethyl alcohol. The more ethyl alcohol is present in a beverage the more potent it will be.



## What is meant by a drink?

Throughout the world the following amounts are described as a unit of alcohol:

- 1 tin of beer (340ml) or
- 1 standard wineglass (120ml) of white table wine or
- 1 single tot (25 ml) of spirits (e.g., brandy)

These drinks roughly contain the same amount of ethyl alcohol.

## What happens after drinking?

When drinking, the alcohol first lands in the stomach. A small quantity of alcohol (e.g., a standard glass of wine) will release more enzymes in the stomach which usually increases appetite. This is why alcohol should ideally be enjoyed with food! However, alcohol is not a food and is not digested like food. It is instantly absorbed in the bloodstream through the stomach wall and distributed throughout the body.

## **When your body is exposed to alcohol regularly it will have the following consequences:**

- Loss of inhibitions
- Mild euphoria
- Increased self-confidence
- Loss of fine motor control
- Loss of hearing
- Slurred speech
- Disorientation
- Staggering
- Loss of balance
- Irregular heartbeat
- Rapid slow breathing

## **What happens in the brain after drinking?**

Alcohol puts the brain to sleep – it gradually slows down the brain and will eventually make the drinker unconscious. As explained in the picture, the more alcohol one consumes, the more areas of the brain are put to sleep.

## **What influences the effect of alcohol on different people?**

People differ in the way they are affected by alcohol. How alcohol will affect you depends on many things:

### **Body mass**

All other things being equal, those with a lower body mass will be more affected by alcohol than those who are heavier set. This is because alcohol is more concentrated in the body of a small person than in the body of a large person.

### **How accustomed the body is to alcohol?**

People who are heavy drinkers gradually build up a resistance to the effects of alcohol – this is also known as “tolerance” and means that the person has to drink more to get the same euphoric effect. A person with a high tolerance to alcohol can drink a lot before getting drunk. This is a dangerous sign and may indicate that the person is developing a drinking problem.

## **Speed of drinking**

The faster you drink, the higher the blood alcohol concentration and the more you will be affected. Drinking at a fast tempo also means that the alcohol will remain in the body for a longer time.

## **Food in the stomach**

Drinking on a full stomach may not affect a person that much because the alcohol mixes with the food. This dilutes the concentration of the alcohol which slows down its absorption in the blood. On an empty stomach alcohol is rapidly absorbed in the bloodstream causing the drinker to be intoxicated in a short space of time.

## **How does the body get rid of alcohol?**

A very small portion of the alcohol consumed can be eliminated on the breath or by sweating. However, this is not the main route in the sobering up process. The bulk of the alcohol which had been consumed is broken down (metabolized) by the liver and then excreted by the kidneys.

The liver can break down approximately 1 drink (unit) per hour. Many people falsely believe that they can sober up by doing strenuous exercise, drinking coffee or taking a cold shower. This may perhaps make the person feel better, but the alcohol will still remain in the bloodstream. The liver cannot be rushed and will break down alcohol in its own time.

## **Why does one get a hangover?**

When alcohol is broken down by the liver, waste products are released in the body. If one consumes alcohol at a rate of one drink per hour, these toxic substances are easily cleared from the blood. If, however, you drink to a point of intoxication, the liver cannot clear away these substances effectively. This will cause these substances to accumulate in the body, making the person feel sick.

## **Guidelines for responsible drinking**

- Make sure that you eat when you drink – avoid drinking on an empty stomach.
- Space your drinks – sip your drinks and try to stretch it over an hour.
- Do not mix your drinks. Drinking several types of alcoholic beverages in one night may increase your risk of a hangover.
- Be aware of your behaviour and language when you drink: look at your drinking like your child may look at it.
- Never push your guests to drink – respect their right to decline.
- Do not exceed the responsible drinking guidelines as recommended by the World Health Organisation: Men: 2 – 3 drinks per day, women: 1 – 2 drinks per day with two alcohol free days per week.
- Alcohol is not to be sold to persons under the age of 18.

## Where to find help?

SANCA [sancanational@telkomsa.net](mailto:sancanational@telkomsa.net) 011 902 3829 or 021 945 4080 or WhatsApp 0765351701

Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) <https://aasouthafrica.org.za/#> 086 1435 722

Christelike Afhanklikheidsdiens (CAD) <https://www.cad.org.za/> 082 571 5472

Contact your nearest church, pastor or social worker

