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Alcohol and Sex

Justin was the new guy at the office and he was looking forward to the company's annual summer party, always held at the boss's ritzy estate by the ocean. These parties were legendary, he'd been told. People from all over the region came to play volleyball on the beach, have bonfires after the sun went down. And it wasn't uncommon for couples to wander off, claiming that what happens at the party stays at the party.

He had to admit that he wasn't always comfortable with parties. Sometimes, he had to have a few drinks before he felt at ease meeting new people. He always behaved himself, but he usually needed something to take the edge off.

The night of the party was no different. In fact, Justin helped himself to more beers than he usually would while Courtney from Marketing downed cocktails and flirted with him all night. What did she mean when she said they should go explore the caves on the beach?

The situation may sound cliché, but Justin and Courtney are not much different from couples who "hook up" when they've had too much alcohol. Today, we'll look at some of the ways drinking alcohol can affect someone sexually.

Physical Issues

Alcohol is a depressant and can cause havoc with your central nervous system. It can also dehydrate you and interfere with blood flow to the genitals.

For men, problems with blood flow can eventually lead to [erectile dysfunction](#) – being unable to keep or maintain an erection firm enough for sex. It can happen in one encounter or eventually become a long-term problem.

Alcohol can also [make it more difficult for men to ejaculate](#), even if they're fully aroused.

In the long term, men who use alcohol excessively could also have trouble conceiving. [Research suggests](#) that drinking five units a week could lower a man's sperm count and affect the quality of that sperm.

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For women, dehydration can cause vaginal dryness. Sex can be uncomfortable or even painful for women when they are not sufficiently lubricated. Women may also have problems reaching orgasm if they've had too much to drink.

Risky Behavior

[In a recent poll](#), we asked SexHealthMatters readers if alcohol use had ever led them to have unsafe sex. Just over 88% of the respondents said yes, they had had unsafe sex under the influence of alcohol.

It probably comes as no surprise that too much alcohol impairs our judgment. We may chuckle about the phrase “beer goggles” – when someone finds a partner more attractive than he or she would in normal circumstances – but lapses in behavioral judgment can have significant health implications.

In 2012, [a Canadian study](#) found that a person's willingness to have unsafe sex increased with the amount of alcohol he or she consumed. And in 2013, [American scientists reported](#) that the more drinks a woman has before sex, the less likely she is to use a condom with that partner.

Unsafe sex can have a number of complications. Unplanned pregnancy can occur with partners who are ill-prepared to bring a child into the world. Sexually-transmitted infections (STIs) like chlamydia, gonorrhea, and genital herpes are common. Certain types of another STI, human papillomavirus (HPV) can cause cervical, anal, and penile cancers, along with some head and neck cancers and genital warts. And HIV is the STI that causes AIDS.

Impaired judgment from too much alcohol can have an emotional impact, too. Friends may have sex when they didn't mean to take their relationship to that level. Partners may make promises they won't remember in the morning – and don't intend to keep. Committed partners may be unfaithful or say things they don't mean. Strangers may feel guilt or shame after an encounter. They may also feel frightened, especially if a pregnancy or STI develops.

Social and Legal Issues

In Justin and Courtney's case, pairing off could lead to a number of troubles at work. There might be some awkwardness in the break room. But there could also be some volatility, especially if their encounter ended with an STI or a pregnancy. The situation could impair their work performance as individuals and affect their ability to work together as a team. Their supervisors and colleagues would likely notice that something wasn't right. If a romance blossomed, their company might have policies against employees dating.

Alcohol may also fuel sexual harassment and violence. Staying sober can help one recognize an unsafe situation and improve the chances of leaving it or calling for help.

This isn't to say that you shouldn't have a few drinks if your body can handle it. And for some, having a little alcohol can make one feel less inhibited and more relaxed, which can help in sexual situations.

But keep in mind that too much alcohol and sex can be a risky combination. Having a clear mind and honest discussion about protection and expectations before going to bed can make the experience more enjoyable for both partners.

If you feel you're having trouble with alcohol, be sure to see your doctor and get treatment.

Resources

Brown University Health Promotion

"Alcohol and Sex"

http://brown.edu/Student_Services/Health_Services/Health_Education/alcohol_tobacco_&_other_drugs/alcohol/alcohol_&_sex.php

EverydayHealth.com

Iliades, Chris, MD

"Why Boozing Can Be Bad for Your Sex Life"

(January 4, 2012)

<http://www.everydayhealth.com/erectile-dysfunction/why-boozing-can-be-bad-for-your-sex-life.aspx>

Huffington Post

Zebroff, Petra, PhD

"What Alcohol Really Does to Your Sex Life"

(January 7, 2013)

http://www.huffingtonpost.ca/petra-zebroff/alcohol-affects-sex-life_b_2389856.html

Sexual Medicine Society of North America

“Alcohol and Male Sexual Function”

<http://www.sexhealthmatters.org/did-you-know/alcohol-and-male-sexual-function>

“Alcohol and Unsafe Sex”

<http://www.sexhealthmatters.org/did-you-know/alcohol-and-unsafe-sex>

“Excessive Alcohol Consumption Could Affect Sperm Count and Quality”

<http://www.sexhealthmatters.org/did-you-know/excessive-alcohol-consumption-could-affect-sperm-count-and-quality>

“Has alcohol use ever led you to have unsafe sex?”

<http://www.sexhealthmatters.org/polls/has-alcohol-use-ever-led-you-to-have-unsafe-sex>

“Survey on Women’s Condom Use After Substance Use”

<http://www.sexhealthmatters.org/did-you-know/survey-on-womens-condom-use-after-substance-use>