Dear Alice,

Does the classification of a "lightweight" with regard to alcohol consumption imply anything about the liver? In particular, is there anything abnormal about feeling tipsy after only one beer (vital stats = 155 lbs., 6 ft.). I know my family has a history of liver problems and I have in the past drank to excess on many occasions. It has never taken much to become inebriated and now it takes even a little less. Should I be worried?

Thanks,
Not worried, just curious

Answer

Dear Not worried, just curious,

Even though alcohol passes through all of our bodies using the same mechanisms (you may want to check out the Go Ask Alice! Q&A How much alcohol a day? [2] for more information), drinking may have very different effects on people. Therefore, it’s difficult to say what may cause someone to be a lightweight? (someone who may feel the effects of alcohol more quickly than others). Even when an individual drinks exactly the same amount of alcohol on two different occasions, each person may experience different outcomes. This is due to a number of factors. And though alcohol has the ability to negatively affect your liver, your individual reaction to alcohol is not a predictor of liver health by itself.

There are a number of factors that affect how your body processes alcohol and/or how you feel as a result of consuming it, including:

- Genetics [3]
- Biological sex
- Body fat percentage
- Speed of consumption
- Type of beverage consumed
- Drinking history (drinking regularly may lead someone to develop tolerance [4])
- Body chemistry (how rapidly the stomach empties into the small intestine may be slowed or increased by anger, fear, stress, euphoria, state of relaxation, etc.)
- A full or empty stomach (a full tummy reduces the absorption rate of alcohol in the body, thus, decreasing the feeling of intoxication.)
- The reason(s) that influence your choice to drink at a given time (e.g., to relax [5], to have
fun, to get drunk, etc.)

- A change in your drinking environment

Getting back to your question about the liver: the short answer is that your "lightweight" experiences may or may not have anything to do with your liver. The liver is responsible for breaking down alcohol in the body, but, as you can see, many factors could play a role in how you feel when drinking. Because you mention that it has never taken much to become intoxicated, it sounds like alcohol impacts you more quickly than others. It could be as simple as the interaction of the physical and psychological factors producing an intoxicated like feeling, even if your blood alcohol concentration (BAC) level doesn't meet the legal definition of intoxication. However, there are many strategies you can employ to be a savvy and responsible drinker, so that you don't end up feeling the effects so quickly.

It's great that you're aware of your family's history of liver problems because the liver may be harmed by alcohol use and abuse. If you're worried about liver issues, you may want to talk to a health care provider about your concerns and what you can do prevent future liver problems. Additionally, just knowing how alcohol impacts you is a great way to develop a healthier approach to drinking!

Alice!
Category: Alcohol & Other Drugs
Alcohol

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Hangover helper and tips for healthy drinking
Can I ask my girlfriend not to drink at college?
When drinking the same amount of alcohol, are you more intoxicated in the air than on the ground?
Suddenly, drinking alcohol makes me sick!

Resources

Medical Services (Morningside)
Columbia Health BASICS program (Morningside)
Medical Services (CUMC)
Addiction Information & Management Strategies (AIMS) (CUMC)

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