Better to drink one a day or many at one time? [1]

Hi Alice,

I am a healthy, fit, 18 year old male. I have tried both ways: consuming small amounts of alcohol regularly (one standard drink a day) and consuming a lot of alcohol irregularly (10 to 20 standard drinks in one night, but only two days a month, or thereabouts).

I have tended towards drinking a lot irregularly because I have found that I can't notice any effects until I have had at least four or five drinks, 80 to 100 proof shots, usually mixed with soft drink.

I was wondering if either way was less healthy or more of a risk as the same amount of alcohol is ultimately consumed. Also, I noticed that I got a bit more of a 'beer gut' when I had one-a-day than 15 at once; is that likely or just my imagination?

Thanks,
Triple Shot

Answer

Dear Triple Shot,

To drink a little or to drink a lot (and how often), that is your question. Depending on how it's consumed, alcohol can be a pleasant, life-enhancing libation; but it can also be a misused, problematic substance. According to the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA) [2], lower-risk drinking is no more than three drinks a day and no more than seven drinks per week for folks assigned female at birth. For those assigned male at birth, it's no more than four drinks a day and no more than 14 drinks per week (remember, a standard drink is one 12 ounce beer, one 5 ounce glass of wine, or one 1.5 ounce shot of 80 proof distilled spirits). Drinking a large amount of alcohol, even every once in a while, could be detrimental to your health (including weight gain). So, the short answer to your query is that if you do drink alcohol and given the choice between the two options you've outlined: it's better to consume small amounts more frequently rather than large amounts infrequently. However, it's worth exploring what's behind that recommendation as well as the reasons why you might choose to drink as you determine what's best for your own personal health.

Multiple drinks, even irregularly, poses health risks and can lead to more risky behavior. Higher-risk drinking [3] is consuming more than the recommended daily limits previously mentioned. Drinking in this way puts a strain on the body, because the liver can only process...
a limited amount of alcohol per hour. Chronic or prolonged higher-risk drinking can lead to pancreatitis, various cancers, liver cirrhosis, high blood pressure, heart failure, and other disorders. Even on a single occasion, higher-risk drinking can be detrimental to your health or even life-threatening. For example, alcohol intoxication increases the risk of heart arrhythmias, particularly atrial fibrillation, which can lead to heart failure and sudden death, even in those who have healthy hearts (for more information about the impact on your health, take a look at How much alcohol a day? [4] in the Go Ask Alice! archives). Beyond that, you may also want keep in mind the other potential undesirable consequences of drinking a lot at once (e.g., legal troubles, injuries, having unprotected sex, etc.).

It may also be wise to consider the psychological aspects [5] of alcohol use. The amount of alcohol that is "healthy" may depend as much on the role it plays in your life as it does on physiological effects or definitions of higher- and lower-risk. Have you thought about why you choose to drink alcohol? Do you use it to have a good time? To relax at the end of the day? Do you find it necessary to drink to be comfortable in certain situations? Do you find yourself not wanting to drink, but drinking anyway? Are you experiencing pressure to consume alcohol? You might consider asking yourself these questions and determining the role you want alcohol to play in your life. Speaking with a substance abuse prevention specialist, mental health professional, or health care provider about any concerns you have may help you explore your relationship with alcohol further.

Oh, and by the way, while the research isn't definitive, as with any food or beverage, excessive calorie consumption (alcoholic beverages can be fairly calorie dense) can lead to weight gain. If you're concerned about your weight, and think that limiting alcohol might help you bust a developing "beer gut," then why not try it?

Kudos to you for asking the question to help inform your choices about alcohol use in the future. Learning more about how it may impact your physical health is wise, but it's also worth considering your reasons for drinking (or not drinking) when deciding what's best for you. To explore lower-risk drinking a bit more, take a peek at How do I drink in moderation? [6] in the Go Ask Alice! archives.

Cheers!

Alice!

Category: Alcohol & Other Drugs [7]
Alcohol [8]

Related questions

Hangover helper and tips for healthy drinking [9]
Liver tenderness from a one-night bender? [10]

Resources

Anonymous Alcohol Self-Assessment [12]
Medical Services (Morningside) [13]
Counseling and Psychological Services (CPS) (Morningside) [14]
Columbia Health BASICS program (Morningside) [15]