Dear Alice,

If someone drinks milk before consuming alcohol, will it help you from getting drunk by "coating your stomach"? Why or why not?

Answer

Dear Reader,

Part of drinking in a safer manner is becoming familiar with the myths and facts about consuming alcohol. It's commonly believed that consuming milk or something greasy coats the stomach and prevents a person from getting drunk. While this isn't true, having eaten prior to or while drinking alcohol does slow down the absorption of it into the bloodstream (though only modestly). So, while milk may not keep you sober, there are plenty of easy ways to keep yourself safer while drinking. Want to know more? Read on!

So, why doesn't "coating the stomach" prevent someone from becoming drunk? In reality, the majority of alcohol absorption happens in the small intestine since it has a larger surface area than the stomach. The stomach and small intestine are separated by the pyloric sphincter, which closes when food is ingested so that the stomach can break it down before moving on to the small intestine. If alcohol and food are ingested simultaneously, this means alcohol reaches the small intestine at a slower rate due to the closed sphincter. Even if you drink as much milk as your heart desires before the alcohol, your body can still absorb the alcohol.

There are a variety of options for slowing the rate of alcohol absorption. These include spacing alcohol intake by drinking non-alcoholic drinks (did anyone say milk?) in between alcoholic drinks and eating protein-rich foods, (e.g., meat, cheese, nuts) before and while drinking. Still, even when the rate of alcohol absorption is decreased, the body still absorbs all of that alcohol eventually. Keep in mind that it typically takes the liver an hour to metabolize the alcohol in twelve ounces of beer, four to five ounces of wine, or one and a half ounces of spirits. However, these are a guideline as the amount of alcohol that is in each type of drink can vary. If drinking on an empty stomach, a person may seem to feel the effects of alcohol faster, and the alcohol may also irritate the stomach.

Employing safer drinking strategies can help prevent consuming too much too quickly. Some of these include:

- Drink no more than one standard drink per hour.
Avoid high-risk heavy drinking. Plan in advance the number of drinks you want to have. Keep track of your drinks to avoid going over your planned amount. Avoid drinking games. Avoid drinks with ingredients that are unknown to you. Make plans before going out about how you're getting home. Never drive after drinking (or get into a car with someone who's been drinking). Avoid mixing alcohol with medications. Never consume a drink that's been unattended.

If you might like more information about drinking in moderation, or on the effects of alcohol in general, check out the responses in the Go Ask Alice! Alcohol & Other Drugs archives. Keep in mind that if you're looking to avoid getting drunk, in addition to using safer drinking practices, you can also choose to not drink. Being informed about safe drinking and alcohol consumption can help inform safe, smart, and responsible decision making in the future. Additionally, speaking with a health promotion specialist can be a great resource for making healthy decisions around alcohol.

Cheers,

Alice!

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