

Moderate and Responsible Drinking: Do No Harm

What is moderate drinking?

We've heard a lot about "moderate drinking" in the media. Most of the current definitions of moderate drinking are "health" related, as researchers have tried to link the number of drinks consumed in a specific time period with chronic disease. Guidelines by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services define moderate drinking as:

- no more than one drink a day for most women
- no more than two drinks a day for most men

Keep in mind that that one or two drinks is not a Fosters "oil can" or refills on the wine until the bottle is empty. A standard drink is defined as 12 ounces of beer, 5 ounces of wine or 1.5 ounces of 80-proof distilled spirits. Each of these drinks contains roughly the same amount of absolute alcohol: approximately 0.5 ounce.

"Moderate or social drinking" refers to drinking patterns that are accepted by the culture in which they occur. However, moderate or social drinking is not necessarily problem-free. Consider the "culture" of many college campuses and you'll find that social drinking can be wrought with harmful consequences.

Moderate drinking is best defined as drinking that does not cause problems for you, your family or society.

Blood alcohol content (BAC)

Defining moderate drinking by the number of drinks consumed over time provides only an estimate of BAC. Age, weight, body fat percentage, general health status, liver functioning and gender are independent variables that conspire to determine BAC, and subsequent impairment.

In the human body, alcohol is easily soluble in water but not so in fat. As a result, alcohol is metabolized differently by everyone. People who are overweight or have a higher body fat percentage will have a higher BAC than leaner, more muscular persons of the same weight. Because women have less lean muscle mass than men, and because women tend to have higher body-fat percentages than men, a woman's BAC will be higher than that of the same weight man when both drink the same amount of alcohol.

What is responsible drinking?

The question of "responsible" drinking is more complicated than simply asking "how much" or "how often" you drink. For example, you might have a high tolerance for alcohol and consume higher quantities without "feeling" intoxicated. But how you "feel" under the influence of alcohol is not a reliable indicator of your impairment. Consider

that many convicted drunk drivers believed they were OK to drive at the time of their arrest because they didn't "feel" impaired when they made the decision to drive.

The better question is: "What happens as a *result* of my drinking?" By definition, responsible drinking implies that you do not become "less" responsible because you've been drinking. If drinking any amount of alcohol causes you to act in a manner contrary to your values, or creates distress or risk for others, you are not drinking responsibly.

In truth, most problem drinkers do not suffer from liver or heart disease, and have never been arrested for drunk driving. When confronted about their drinking, they are quick to point out these facts. The truth is: Most alcohol-related problems are interpersonal in nature. Marital conflicts and family problems that arise as a result of alcohol abuse do not garner nearly the attention as the medical or legal consequences. They are, however, equally devastating to individuals and society.

If you are concerned about the effects of alcohol in your life, talk with a trusted friend, your doctor or your employee assistance professional.

Source "Alcohol Metabolism," *Alcohol Alert* No. 35. National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, 1997; Dawson, D.A.; Grant, B.F.; and Chou, P.S. "Gender differences in alcohol intake." In: Hunt, W.A., and Zakhari, S., eds. *Stress, Gender, and Alcohol-Seeking Behavior*. National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, Research Monograph No. 29. NIH Pub. No. 95-3893, pp. 1-21.

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