



The facts on drinking

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Many people think that women get drunk faster than men, but is it true? Absolutely!

If we take a man and a woman of similar weight and body type, and have them drink the same amount of alcohol, the woman will end up with a higher blood alcohol content (or BAC). But why?

It's all about how much water there is in your body. On average, a male body is about 66% water while that of a woman only about 55% water. Therefore, the woman's body has less water for alcohol to dissolve into. Fascinating.

When you have a drink your body immediately goes to work on the alcohol. Some of it is absorbed in your stomach while most is absorbed in your small intestine. Once it is in your bloodstream, alcohol goes to your organs. Right away, your kidney, lungs and liver start to remove it. Your kidneys expel 5% in urine, about the same you lose by exhaling (that is why the breathalyzer works) and your liver breaks down the rest, which then leaves your body in urine.

Your brain is also affected — quickly. As your blood alcohol content increases, different parts of your brain are affected. It starts with the cerebral cortex, the outer layer of your brain that is responsible for thought, mood, reasoning and memory. In other words, your judgement. When you drink, the alcohol makes it harder to understand and to communicate with other people. It also slows down your brain functions that help you resolve conflicts peacefully.

Alcohol also affects your cerebellum. This is the area of the brain that looks after your balance and movement. That is where the staggering and imbalance come from as you get drunk.

Take in enough alcohol and it starts to affect the medulla. Now this is where things get most serious. The

medulla controls automatic brain functions like breathing and body temperature. A person who is severely intoxicated often has slow or irregular breathing. They may lose the gag reflex which can lead to choking their own vomit.

Knowing these things explains quite a lot, doesn't it? Women get intoxicated faster; drunks have poor balance; judgement flies out the window as intoxication increases; alcohol may start out as a stimulant, but it soon becomes a depressant; it is also a diuretic which causes your body to expel four times as much liquid as you take in; if you pass out or fall asleep, your body continues to absorb the alcohol you drank.

Quite the little fact sheet! By learning about the effects of alcohol on the body, we can perhaps make better decisions about what we consume. Drinking does not have to be harmful, but it can be if you drink a lot.

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Heavy drinking, or chronic alcohol abuse, is when you have too much to drink on one occasion over a long period. This is linked to liver, brain and nerve damage as well as alcohol addiction.

Alternately, binge drinking (acute alcohol abuse) is short term heavy drinking. It is linked to alcohol poisoning, violent and non-violent injuries and aggression.

All of these bits of information come from a new website set up by the Canadian Public Health Association (www.drinkingfacts.ca) that aims to educate youth about alcohol, but the information is valuable for anyone who chooses to have a drink, or maybe especially five drinks.

One more fact? Since alcohol is a diuretic, as the body dehydrates, organs begin to take liquids from the brain. This causes the brain to shrink, pulling away from the skull... and explains why hangover headaches are so painful. Drink responsibly.