

Alcohol and unprotected sex

Mixing sex with too much alcohol could leave you with more than you bargained for. Because alcohol can mess up your judgement, it's easy to forget about using a condom or taking the pill which could leave you vulnerable to sexually transmitted infections, an unwanted pregnancy or a night you regret with someone you don't even fancy.

FACTS and FIGURES

Sexually transmitted infections

The rapid spread of sexually transmitted infections, or STIs, is a growing problem in the UK. The government says that almost 400,000 new cases were diagnosed in 2007. The infections are growing fastest among young people.⁽¹⁾

The two most common sexually transmitted infections among young people are:⁽²⁾

Chlamydia Because this STI sometimes shows no symptoms, it can be difficult to diagnose. It can cause infertility in the long term, plus an unpleasant discharge from the penis or vagina.

Genital warts These hard, gritty bumps can appear around the genitals or anus. They don't always spread through penetrative sex – sometimes close genital contact is enough.⁽³⁾

More serious but less common STIs include Syphilis, HIV and Hepatitis B.

The best way to protect yourself against sexually transmitted infections is to wear a condom. But drinking can make you forget, or not bother in the first place. This is because alcohol can lower inhibitions⁽⁴⁾ and make you more likely to take risks⁽⁵⁾. In one survey, a third of 16-22-year-olds said they have had unprotected sex when drunk.⁽⁶⁾ By ignoring advice on safe sex, or getting drunk, they're running a serious risk of infection and unwanted pregnancy.

Many STIs are simple to treat if spotted early. So, if you think you might have one, make an appointment with your nearest Genito-Urinary Medicine (GUM) clinic and get it sorted. You can find your local clinic online at www.ruthinking.co.uk.

Alcohol and unwanted pregnancy

The other consequence of going without contraception is that you or your partner could get pregnant. The UK currently has the highest teenage pregnancy rate in Western Europe⁽⁷⁾. Going without a condom because you've been drinking too much could mean facing parenthood long before you feel ready.

If you think you may be pregnant, help is available. You can get emergency contraception (sometimes called 'the morning after pill') free from most local pharmacies, as well as a GUM or family planning clinic. It's effective up to 72 hours after you've had unprotected sex but the earlier you take it the better.

Alcohol and losing your virginity

Choosing to have sex for the first time can make you feel a range of different emotions. You might feel excited, stressed, scared and nervous all at once.

Because of these conflicting feelings, some people drink when they lose their virginity. Since alcohol, like other drugs, lowers your inhibitions, drinking can seem like a good idea if you're nervous about being naked in front of another person, or worried about 'getting it right' in bed. Studies show that 40% of 13 and 14-year-olds were drunk or stoned for their first time.⁽⁸⁾

Many later wished they had been sober. In one survey, nearly one third of teens said they were unhappy with the way they lost their virginity, because they were too drunk.⁽⁹⁾ It doesn't help that too much alcohol affects men's sexual performance, too.

Planning ahead is a good idea. If you think that you're likely to have sex, stay away from too much alcohol so you have an experience you remember.

The 'beer goggles' effect

Too much alcohol can affect your sexual judgement⁽¹⁰⁾. Suddenly that bloke you don't really like becomes the best looking person at the party. This side effect of drinking can be very embarrassing. In a recent survey, nearly half (43%) of 10-17-year-olds said they had kissed or slept with someone when drunk they wouldn't normally fancy.⁽¹¹⁾

Going home with the wrong person can also be dangerous. In the same survey almost a quarter (22%) of people interviewed said they had gone home with a stranger, while 15% had invited a stranger home to their place.⁽¹²⁾ Being drunk makes you vulnerable, and getting intimate with someone you hardly know may lead to you going further than you want to go, or even end in rape and sexual assault.

Drinking and confidence

The results of a special Drinkaware survey found that more than a third (39%) of 16 and 17-year-olds drank alcohol to increase their confidence with the opposite sex⁽¹³⁾. But, while a little 'Dutch courage' may appear to boost your confidence, the slurring and sickness that may come after too much alcohol can look less than attractive to the object of your affections.

Staying safe

Carry a condom Whether you're planning to drink or have sex, a condom is the best way to protect yourself against STIs. It's best to carry one just in case.

Stay in control When it comes to sex, you are the person in control of what does or doesn't happen. You should never feel under pressure to go further than you're happy with.

Watch out for your mates If you see a friend leave with someone they don't know, call them over and make sure they're OK. They'll thank you for it later.

Stay the distance Try matching every alcoholic drink you have with something soft like Coke or fruit juice.

Eat up Food slows down the absorption of alcohol into your bloodstream. Have a big meal before you go out and eat a few snacks along the way to help you stay sober.

Where to go for further information and advice about alcohol

Brook (www.brook.org.uk) is a national charity offering free and confidential sexual health advice and services to people under 25.

The Family Planning Association (www.fpa.org.uk) can help you make informed choices about sex and contraception.

For up-to-date interactive information and advice about sex and relationships visit R U Thinking? (www.ruthinking.co.uk).

Head to The Site (www.thesite.org) for regularly updated guides taking a comprehensive look at sexual health, alcohol, drugs and much more.

Drinkaware (www.drinkaware.co.uk) features the help and advice you need to make informed choices about sex and alcohol.

References

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