

Alcohol, drugs & sex

Alcohol.jpg



Mixing sex with alcohol and drugs can affect your sexual health and overall wellbeing. This is because when you are drunk or high you may do things that you wouldn't usually do. Here we look at the risks and how you can minimise them.

The consequences of drugs and alcohol

Sex should be a fun and pleasurable experience, but drinking excessively or taking drugs can have a big impact on your behaviour and judgement. Different drugs or strengths of alcohol can also have varying effects on your body and emotions. As well as making you sick or unwell, you are more likely to:

- forget to use a [condom](#) or [female condom](#)
- not realise if someone is wearing a condom or if it breaks or slips off
- not remember having sex/have [unprotected sex](#)
- have sexual activity that hurts you (you may be less sensitive to pain when drunk or high)
- be unaware of someone spiking your drink
- have sex with someone you wouldn't usually choose to be with
- have problems with your sexual performance, for example erection or ejaculation difficulties
- inject drugs with a used needle, risking [HIV](#) infection and other blood-borne viruses.¹

You should speak to a sexual health professional as soon as possible if you're worried that you have put yourself at risk. You may not have any symptoms of [sexually transmitted infections \(STIs\)](#), but this doesn't mean you haven't been infected.

If you're worried about HIV infection, find out everything you need to know in our [HIV Transmission and Prevention section](#).

Making safe decisions

The legal age of drinking alcohol differs from country-to-country. For example, alcohol is legal in the United Kingdom (UK) from the age of 18, but in the United States of America (USA) you need to be over the age of 21 to drink. It's a good idea to look at government guidelines to help you understand how much is considered a safe amount.²

There are many recreational drugs that are available, some of which are illegal, such as cocaine, ecstasy and cannabis. Others are legal or banned - these could be prescription drugs or drugs that contain one or more chemical substances that produce similar effects to illegal drugs, also known as a 'legal high'.³

Having a few drinks or taking drugs can make us feel happy, relaxed and more confident. But drugs can change the way you feel and damage your health – especially if your aim is to get high or you mix them with alcohol.

If you binge drink or get drunk you will have far less control when it comes to making sensible decisions, such as using condoms and other contraception. This can increase your chances of pregnancy or getting a sexually transmitted infection (STI), including [HIV](#).

Sexual consent

If you are under the influence of drugs or alcohol, you may feel you want to have sex, but then could change your mind. This is your right and no one should force you to do anything you don't want to do. But unfortunately, it does happen and always needs to be reported. Whether you were drunk at the time or not, sexual abuse is never acceptable.

Sometimes it can be hard to know how you are going to react in a certain situation, so it's up to you to be aware of how alcohol and drugs are making you feel. If you are going to drink, take drugs and have sex then you need to make sure you are doing it responsibly.

Keep in control

Make sure you are around people you trust who will not put pressure on you to do something that puts your sexual health at risk. If you are going to have a one-night stand and you are drunk or high, stop and ask yourself if you are putting yourself in an unsafe situation.

Understand the law in different countries

Know what drugs you are taking and be aware that some drugs can be stronger than you realise (and may be lethal). Be aware of guidelines around the recommended safe amounts of alcohol per week (units) for a man or a woman. Remember, just because a drug is legal, doesn't mean it is safe.

Practice safer sex

Always use a condom or female condom to prevent STIs, HIV and pregnancy. You don't need to rely on just one form of contraceptive, but remember that the Pill won't protect you from an STI or HIV.

Don't share needles

If you choose to inject drugs, make sure that you *don't* share injecting equipment. [Sharing used needles to inject drugs](#) puts you at risk of HIV infection and other blood-borne viruses.

Seek further help

If you're worried that you're struggling to control your drinking or drug taking then it's important to speak to a healthcare professional, counsellor or contact a helpline that can offer you the right advice and support.

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- 1. Cook, P.A. et al (2010) 'Contributions of alcohol use to teenage pregnancy and sexually transmitted infection rates' North West Public Health Observatory, Centre for Public Health, Liverpool John Moores University
- 2. Drink Aware (2015) 'Alcohol unit guidelines'
- 3. Talk to Frank 'Legal Highs' [accessed May 2015]

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