21st birthday coming up? Should I drink? [1]

Dear Alice,

My 21st birthday is coming up. I've already had two sets of friends and my mom's boyfriend offer to take me to the bar for drinks. The problem is, I have never been drunk before, let alone consumed alcohol. I chose not to drink for a few different reasons and am not sure if I should change anything for my birthday. On the other hand, I feel that I am obliged to go out drinking on this "special occasion."

? Sober 'til 21 (or maybe later)

Answer

Dear Sober 'til 21 (or maybe later),

Despite the seemingly mandatory cultural imperative to throw down and get wasted on your 21st, how you spend your birthday is up to you. While abstaining from drinking is a respectable choice, moderate drinking is another healthy option for celebrating this milestone. What's most important is assessing how comfortable you feel with the different options.

As you probably are well aware, there's huge variation in the degree that people, both under 21 and over, approach alcohol. Statistics show that about 60 percent of all adults consumed alcohol in the last year, while about a third of all adults had five or more drinks on at least one day. In other words, a little more than half of all people who can legally drink choose to do so and those who get drunk are in the minority. You are in good company in your choice not to drink, and abstaining from alcohol is, of course, a healthy choice. However, moderate drinking is generally considered a low- to no-risk activity.

The social cachet and company kept while drinking moderately are major reasons why people choose to "enjoy a drink or two" occasionally. Moderate drinking is defined as women having one or fewer drinks in one day and men having two or fewer in one day. If one chooses to consume more than the moderate amount, risk factors may increase, such as impaired judgment and other potentially negative outcomes (physical, emotional, legal, etc.).

The big 2-1 is marked as a special occasion in the United States because the government sets the legal drinking limit at this particular birthday. In other countries, the legal drinking age is 18 or even 16, making the 21st birthday in these countries just another year to celebrate in any way you'd like. You could certainly adapt this mindset to your impending benchmark, and continue with your non-alcoholic modus operandi. On the other hand, taking your friends or
mom's boyfriend up on their offer may be a new, exciting experience.

If you do decide to flash that newly minted I.D. and drink on your birthday, it will be a good idea to express your intentions to the company you're with, letting your friends know how much you'd like to drink or what you'd like to try. If you do decide to drink on the heavier side, it is critical that you do so in a safe environment, where car keys are collected and you are in the company of friends who have your best interest in mind.

You may want to revisit your original reasons for choosing not to drink in approaching your big day. Do you feel these reasons still fit well with your life? Has anything changed for you (other than getting a little older) since you made this conviction? In the end, you will still be the same person the day following your 21st birthday, whether you spent the night playing Scrabble, having a six pack, or enjoying a glass of pinot noir. Whether you decide to stick to abstaining or experiment with your now-sanctioned legal privilege to drink alcohol, this birthday has promise to be one of the most memorable.

Cheers!

Alice!
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