How do I drink in moderation? [1]

Dear Alice,

How do I drink moderately in social situations?

Answer

Dear Reader,

If a person chooses to drink, moderate, or lower-risk drinking, is an approach to consuming alcohol which minimizes negative side effects. Based on your question, you sound concerned that, in social situations, you are drinking more than is recommended. To fully answer your question, it's best to first take some time to explore the reason(s) this might be happening. Are you stressed and looking to alcohol for relief [2]? Do you feel as if you have trouble stopping drinking once you start [3]? Does alcohol addiction run in your family [4]? If any of these ring true for you, it may be worth exploring your relationship with alcohol further with a counselor or health care provider. However, if social pressure is indeed your primary concern, Reader, a way to reframe that pressure and make it easier to drink in moderation (or in a low-risk manner [5]) is by realizing that your peers likely drink moderately, if they drink at all. Also, practicing how to casually, yet firmly, say no when turning down offers of alcohol in social situations may help you feel more capable and confident in your choice to use alcohol moderately.

It's a common misperception that people think others are drinking more than they actually are and there's research to back that up. According to the 2013 National College Health Association's American College Health Assessment, when students reported their perceptions of drinking in college, researchers found that students believed that 93.5 percent of their peers used alcohol in the past 30 days. The study found that in reality, just over 64 percent of students used alcohol in the past 30 days?that's quite a difference! According to the National Survey on Drug Use and Health [6], just over 50 percent of all adults aged 18 and over in the United States (not just college students) report drinking alcohol. However, around 70 percent are drinking four or fewer drinks during a given occasion or don't drink, period. All this to say, Reader, the knowledge that others are probably consuming alcohol in a low-risk manner (or not at all) might make it easier to do so yourself.

In addition to strategies about limiting and pacing your alcohol consumption (found in related Q&As Hangover helper and tips for healthy drinking [7] and How can I be a responsible guest while drinking? [8]), a great skill to develop is how to confidently decline offers of more alcohol
without feeling uncomfortable. The National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA) offers suggestions for how to prepare yourself in advance to say no when you’re ready to stop or slow down your drinking:

- **You don’t have to give an explanation** when you say “no thanks.” Being polite yet clear in your “no?” will keep the tone light while showing you are serious about your answer. Hesitating or searching for an excuse might just give someone else an opportunity to try to persuade you. You don’t owe anyone an explanation. Saying something like “I’m not allowed to drink?” may make you feel less powerful to stick to your decisions? if, when, and how much you drink is completely up to you.

- **Repeat your clear and simple refusal** if anyone keeps trying to convince you. Hopefully, they will get the message that this is not up for discussion. If not, you might consider spending time with someone else.

- **Come up with a little script for yourself** so you’ll know exactly what to say in the moment. Practicing in advance how you will say no in a friendly but resolute way may help you feel more at ease in the moment.

Although there are general guidelines about alcohol quantity consumption to keep folks safe and healthy, specific recommendations can vary from person to person. For more details on factors that shape how much alcohol can be tolerated by an individual, read How much alcohol a day? The NIAAA’s Rethinking Drinking website may also help you think more critically about how you use alcohol. If you try these strategies and are still concerned about your drinking behavior, it might be best to speak to someone about it such as a health care provider, a mental health professional, or substance abuse counselor.

Thinking in advance of how to keep your drinking to a moderate level in social situations? as you are clearly doing, Reader? is a great first step in making it happen!

Alice!
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Alcohol & Other Drugs
Alcohol

Related questions
21st birthday coming up ? Should I drink?
Better to have one alcoholic drink every day or many at one time infrequently?
Help for friends who drink too much
Friend of an alcohol abuser

Resources
Medical Services (Morningside)
Counseling and Psychological Services (CPS) (Morningside)
Columbia Health BASICS program (Morningside)
Medical Services (CUMC)
Mental Health Service (CUMC)
Addiction Information & Management Strategies (AIMS) (CUMC)

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