How can I be a responsible guest while drinking? [1]

Dear Alice,

What are strategies for drinking less in a social situation or for avoiding driving while impaired?

Answer

Dear Reader,

First off, bottoms up to you for seeking out strategies to keep your drinking in check! To maintain your safety (and the safety of others), and to make sure you’re not “that guy?” or “that gal?” at a soirée with all your closest friends (you know, the one stuck in the bathroom sick all night), it’s helpful to know strategies for limiting or pacing your drinking. Depending on the type of social situation and setting, you may want to try different approaches. Here are a few to get you started:

- **Eat before or during drinking.** Having food in your belly helps slow the absorption of alcohol through the lining of your stomach. It can also help you avoid a hangover [2].
- **Decide on a set number of drinks ahead of time and stick to it.** If you know how much it takes to get to your ideal “buzz,” shoot for that number and don’t go any higher.
- **Alternate between alcoholic and non-alcoholic drinks.** Some people report feeling like the odd one out if they don’t have a drink in their hand at a party or at the bar. If that’s the case for you, try alternating between alcoholic drinks and non-alcoholic drinks. Soda, juice, seltzer, or non-alcoholic beers are good alternate options that also happen to be alcohol look-a-likes.
- **Dilute.** If you’re drinking liquor, use more mixer. Not only will you consume less alcohol, your drink may also taste better.
- **Add extra ice to your drink.** If you have access to ice (and are drinking something you’d like to be cold), you can also slow your alcohol consumption by adding extra ice.
- **Pace yourself.** Drinking more slowly will also help you drink less and maintain a healthier buzz for a longer duration.
- **Enlist a friend’s support in monitoring your consumption and cutting you off.** If you’re concerned you won’t be able to reduce your drinking on your own, seek support from a friend. You can ask that s/he tell you to stop after a specific number of drinks or after a certain time in the evening. Just make sure it’s a friend who will be able to remain sober enough to pay attention.
- **Avoid drinking games.** Drinking games are a surefire way to drink a lot in a short period of time, often more than you first intended.
- **Avoid shots.** Shots are the opposite of pacing yourself and can feel deceptive because it looks like a small amount of liquor, but they are generally very high in alcohol content.
- **Spend time with friends who consume less.** Many people report that being with heavier drinkers can make it harder to cut back, even if there’s no peer pressure to drink. This may be because drinking more heavily becomes normalized. If this is the case for you, consider participating in some social situations that involve little or no drinking, or attending social events with a crew that tends to drink less.

Here are some ideas that people have used successfully to avoid driving while impaired:

- **Take cabs.** Program the phone numbers for local cab companies on your cell phone, especially if you do not live in a place where you can hail a taxi from the street. You can drive to your destination and leave your car at the end of the night, making your way home via cab. You can also consider taking a cab to your destination so that driving home is not even an option.
- **Appoint a sober designated driver.** If you are going to social situations in a group, choose a designated driver or someone who is sober for the night. Rotate different friends as the sober driver on different nights.
- **Take public transit.** Some places have better public transportation options than others. If it’s an option where you live, take advantage of it. If you are new to navigating the system, look up the routes, cost, and timing before going out, when you are still sober.
- **Decide on alternate sleeping arrangements ahead of time.** If driving home is not an option, is there a friend who lives nearby who you could crash with?
- **Decide to stop drinking two hours before you leave an event.** For example, if you think you’ll want to leave an event at around 2am, stop drinking at midnight. This will not guarantee that you are sober enough to drive by 2am, but it may result in you becoming sober enough to decide not to drive. It’s also good hangover prevention to switch to hydrating fluids for a couple of hours before you go to sleep after a night of heavy drinking. Two hours of drinking water is likely to make the morning less painful.

If you are still concerned about your drinking after trying some of these tips, you may want to make an appointment with your medical or mental health provider to discuss this with her or him. For more general information on alcohol, check out the Go Ask Alice! Alcohol and Other Drugs archives.

Cheers to you, my friend!

Alice!

**Related questions**

- [Hangover helper and tips for healthy drinking](#)
- [Fun without drugs?](#)
- [Help for friends who drink too much](#)

**Resources**

- [Anonymous Alcohol Self-Assessment](#)
Medical Services (Morningside)  [9]
Counseling and Psychological Services (CPS) (Morningside)  [10]
Columbia Health BASICS program (Morningside)  [11]
Medical Services (CUMC)  [12]
Mental Health Service (CUMC)  [13]
Addiction Information & Management Strategies (AIMS) (CUMC)  [14]
Student Health Service BASICS program (CUMC)  [15]

Published date:
Jul 26, 2015

Source URL: http://goaskalice.columbia.edu/answered-questions/how-can-i-be-responsible-guest-while-drinking

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