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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),

It's understandable that you're feeling an obligation to go out drinking on your 21st birthday. In U.S. culture, there's often a societal pressure to throw down and drink once it's legal for you to do so. That being said, how you spend your birthday — whether you choose to abstain, have one or two beverages, or drink on the heavier side — is up to you. What's most critical is assessing how comfortable you feel with the different options and communicating with friends and family so they can help you celebrate in the way you choose.

It may be helpful to remember that people choose to drink to varying degrees and those decisions can change over time. Some people choose to never drink, others enjoy a beverage in social settings, and others choose to have an alcoholic beverage on a daily basis. What's also worth noting is that the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Addiction ^[2] (NIAAA) found that those who binge drink or engage in heavy alcohol use are in the minority. However you choose to engage with alcohol (if at all) on your birthday is ultimately up to you, but it also doesn't have to define your future drinking choices.

In the United States, a person's 21st birthday is often considered a special occasion because it marks the age at which they can legally consume alcohol. In some other countries, the legal drinking age is younger (18 or even 16), making the 21st birthday just another year to celebrate. As you get closer to the big event, considering your original reasons for choosing not to drink may be useful. 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 decision? If you do decide to flash that newly-minted I.D. and drink on your birthday, it might be helpful to express your intentions to your friends and family, letting them 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 can be helpful to do so in a safer environment, where you're in the company of friends who have your best interest in mind. If that's not the vibe you're going for, perhaps you can have a drink with your different groups of friends and mom's boyfriend on different days. You may find that you have more control of your drinking in the smaller settings and you get to extend your birthday celebration! If you're looking for more information about how to drink in a lower risk manner, you may want to read the related Q&As, as they provide a lot of additional guidance.

All that said, the best decision is the one that makes you the most comfortable. Whether you spend the night drinking water or alcohol, this birthday has promise to be one of the most memorable!

Cheers!

Alice!

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