Dear Alice,

Do different kinds of alcohol (specifically liquor) actually make you different kinds of drunk? Or is it a cultural/psychological thing? I've noticed that I feel different when drinking wine vs. vodka vs. tequila, and I'm wondering if there's a physiological reason.

Answer

Dear Reader,

The experience of being intoxicated or getting drunk is rather subjective and may be different for different people. Some typical signs of intoxication include impaired judgment, relaxation, change of mood, decreased inhibition, and decreased alertness. When it comes to how alcohol affects the body, there are a number of observable and measurable factors that impact the physiological effects of intoxication. With that in mind, you may be referring to an experience that's a bit less objective or measurable: there has been some scientific investigation into what some folks expect to experience when drinking alcohol and even different varieties of boozy beverages. These expectations, in turn, seem to influence how people subjectively experience what they perceive to be differing types of intoxication (more on this later). To dig deeper into the details of the effects of alcohol, it's often helpful to start with what can be observed in the body when booze is involved.
When drinking alcohol, intoxication occurs when it passes from the stomach and intestines to the blood in a process called absorption. While all types of ingested alcohol are eventually absorbed, the rate of absorption is determined by factors such as sex assigned at birth, body weight, type of alcohol, full or empty stomach, speed of consumption, and the use of medications or other drugs in your system. For most people, the body can process approximately 1 to 1.5 ounces (oz.) of pure alcohol an hour, which is the amount contained in a single standard drink (i.e., 12 oz. beer, 5 oz. of wine, or 1.5 oz. of hard liquor). It may help to keep in mind that mixed drinks and alcoholic punches may contain more or less liquor depending on the type of drink and the person doing the mixing. If you’re unsure about the alcohol content of a certain drink, check out the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism's drink size calculator [2]. If you want to know exactly how much alcohol you’re consuming, consider sticking to clearly labeled, bottled alcoholic beverages or measure and mix your own drinks.

Along with the physiological effects, it has been noted that a person’s expectations about how they will feel after drinking alcohol can also play a role in their subjective experiences when intoxicated. Alcohol-expectancy theory suggests that people consume alcohol because they believe or expect that they’ll experience certain effects. These expectations (which may be influenced by cultural beliefs regarding alcohol and behavior) can then impact emotional and behavioral responses as a result of drinking alcohol in general and sometimes even a certain type of alcoholic beverage specifically.

For example, in a study investigating alcohol expectancies amongst college students, participants associated wine with tension-reduction more so than with beer or liquor. On the other hand, the same group of folks reported that they didn't agree that wine would impair cognition, judgement, or be more likely to lead to risky behaviors. But, it’s good to keep in mind that wine, per standard drink size, has the same amount of pure alcohol as a standard serving of any variety of alcohol. While the choice of alcoholic beverage can vary between people, the rate at which the alcohol is absorbed into the body doesn't change. As such, the researchers do note in the study that these expectancies about wine may lead wine drinkers to underestimate the potential for any negative consequences as a result of drinking the fermented grape beverage. No matter what type of alcohol you choose and regardless of any beliefs about how it makes you feel when you drink it, it’s good to keep these factors in mind.

And speaking of informed choices, if you’re interested in avoiding negative effects related to intoxication, you may take a gander at Hangover helper and tips for healthy drinking [3]. For more general information on alcohol, you can check out the Go Ask Alice! Alcohol and Other Drugs [4] archive.

Cheers,

Alice!

Category: Alcohol & Other Drugs [5]
Alcohol [6]

Related questions