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Powdered alcohol — What is it? Is it safe? ^[1]

Dear Alice,

I've been reading news stories about powdered alcohol recently. Is this a real thing? Is it safe? Do they sell it near campus? What happens if you snort it?

Thanks, Curious

Answer

Dear Curious,

Powdered alcohol does exist, but it's not on the market yet. Recently it's been making headlines as familiar disagreements between manufacturers of the product, politicians, and public health professionals get press. In March 2015, the U.S. Alcohol and Tobacco Tax and Trade Bureau (TTB) approved revised labels for powdered alcohol, allowing the product to be sold in the United States. But before you go looking for it on store shelves, be aware that as of June 2015, twenty-two states have banned powdered alcohol. Additionally, while the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has approved the ingredients used in powdered alcohol, it has not approved or tested the product itself. And, at the same time manufacturers tout the fun convenience of the product, many politicians and public health professionals are more wary of the product and its possible abuses, especially by underage drinkers.

Powdered alcohol is alcohol that has been made solid by a chemical technology called host-guest chemistry. At the molecular level, the individual ethanol molecules are separated and caged by single molecules (in this case called cyclodextrin, which as its name suggests, acts like a round cage that envelops and suspends each ethanol molecule). Without the "host" or molecular cages, ethanol molecules hydrogen bond with each other, which is why alcohol is liquid at room temperature. By pulling apart the hydrogen bonds, the substance becomes solid and powdery at room temp. In order to use powdered alcohol, the powder is added to water and stirred (according to the manufacturer, it takes about one minute of stirring for all the powder to dissolve). And just like any other form of alcohol, consumers will need to be 21 years of age to use powdered alcohol legally in the United States.

Manufacturers claim that one benefit of powdered alcohol is that it can make transport easier;

they even suggest that powdered alcohol might be a better way to bring alcoholic beverages on planes by reducing fuel costs associated with weight (since the powder is lighter than bottles). Novelty beverage manufacturers believe that their product will gain popularity because of the ease of its use and convenience: a pocket-sized pouch of powdered alcohol is designed to deliver a drink with about ten to twelve percent alcohol.

Although there's relatively little research about powdered alcohol, most public health professionals agree that powdered alcohol carries the same health risks as regular alcohol, such as affecting the liver, memory, and metabolism (To learn more about how alcohol affects the body, take a scroll through the *Go Ask Alice! Alcohol & Other Drugs* [2] archives). That being said, medical professionals do have some concerns about increased potential for misuse and abuse, including concerns that the dosage may be difficult to self-regulate (e.g., adding powder to an already alcoholic drink or not keeping track of how much powder you have added). As consumers begin using this product, and as researchers and medical professionals study it further, keep an eye out for additional information.

To speak to your question about snorting the product: Manufacturers claim that snorting powdered alcohol would be painful and an inefficient method to get a high, stating that it would take up to 60 minutes for the alcohol to be registered in the body. There isn't much in the way of reliable testimony or scientific research on snorting powdered alcohol. Although snorting substances can speed or enhance the effects on the brain by circumventing the digestive system, inhaling any drug through the nose carries associated risks, like damage to the nasal membranes, sinus infections, and even contracting hepatitis C through sharing snorting straws with others.

If you choose to use alcohol, be it in the powdered or liquid form, consider some of the safer ways to enjoy your cocktail [3], and read up on how to plan for a painless "morning after." [4]

To your health!

Alice!

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