

Alcohol: Lowering Risk ^[1]

Alcohol can be a way to enhance social experiences, especially when consumed in a way that reduces the risk of negative health effects. Most Columbia students who choose to drink practice lower-risk drinking behaviors. What are high-risk drinking behaviors then? High-risk drinking usually corresponds to one of two different behaviors: binge drinking and heavy drinking.

- **Binge Drinking:** Defined for men as 5 or more drinks, and for women as 4 or more drinks, within two hours.
- **Heavy Drinking:** Defined as consuming more 4 drinks for men and 3 drinks for women on a given day.

Note: There may be other biological differences at play, but sex assigned at birth plays a role in how alcohol impacts the body. Because alcohol typically distributes throughout the water in the body, it will be more concentrated in women because they have less water in their bodies than men. This impacts alcohol's effects and, drink for drink, a woman of a similar size and weight will have a higher blood alcohol content (BAC) than a man. This is the reason for the difference in number of standard drinks in the drinking behaviors described.

Lower-risk drinking helps you maximize the fun and minimize the potential for harm that can occur due to alcohol intoxication (e.g., acute dehydration, legal troubles, etc.). There are ways to engage in lower-risk alcohol use.

Lower-risk drinking involves:

- Determining the number of drinks you plan to consume before you start to drink.
- Using counting strategies such as tallying drinks on your phone or putting bottle caps in

your pockets.

- Consuming no more than three drinks for women / four drinks for men in one sitting.
- Understanding how your height and weight will impact how much you can drink
- Hydrating and eating before and while you are drinking.
- Avoiding OTC/prescription or other illegal drugs that interact negatively with alcohol
- Drinking at a pace of no more than one standard drink per hour. A standard drink = 12 oz. for beer, 5 oz. for wine, and 1.5 oz. for liquor.
- Alternating alcohol-free drinks and drinks containing alcohol. If you want an alcohol look-alike, consider “dressing up” your water by ordering a seltzer with lime, or asking for a non-alcoholic beer or daiquiri.
- Avoiding drinking games; or, if you choose to play, setting a limit for how long you’ll take part or how much you’ll drink.
- Avoiding shots.
- Understanding your tolerance level
- Stopping drinking at a pre-determined time.
- Making an exit plan before going out. Make sure you know how you will get home before you leave.
- Asking friends for help sticking to your drinking “rules”.
- Knowing what is in your drink.
- Never leaving a drink unattended.

Recognizing risk:

Occasionally, a person may consume more than planned. In some cases, this can result in alcohol poisoning. If you can recognize the signs, you can help keep yourself and your friends safe. Alcohol depresses the nervous system. At high levels of consumption, this can impact a person’s ability to breathe and the gag reflex, which prevents choking. Even after someone stops drinking, alcohol is in the system and can be fatal.

If you observe someone that is experiencing the following symptoms, call for or get help immediately:

- Semi-consciousness or unconsciousness and cannot be awakened
- Cold, clammy, pale, or bluish skin
- Slowed breathing (fewer than eight breaths per minute)
- Irregular breathing (10 seconds or more between breaths)
- Vomiting while "sleeping" or passed out, and not waking up after vomiting

If a person has any of these symptoms, “sleeping it off” may not help and could put them at increased risk. Taking action is critical and there are some steps you can take to get the person help.

- **Call 911 immediately** and be prepared to provide the emergency personal with information regarding the person's alcohol consumption.
- **Never leave the person alone** if they are unconscious. Alcohol poisoning can inhibit an individual's gag reflex and cause them to choke on their own vomit.
- **If the person is vomiting, help them.** It is critical to make sure that you are either helping the person sit up or are lying them down on their side so that they don't choke on their own vomit.

Last reviewed/updated: November 24, 2020

Columbia Health BASICS program (Morningside) ^[2]

BASICS is designed to assist students in examining their drinking and other drug-use behavior in a judgment-free environment. Services provided through the BASICS program are non-judgmental, non-labeling, and private.

This service is available to all all registered undergraduate, graduate, and professional students on the Morningside campus, including Affiliated Schools: Teachers College, Union Theological Seminary and Jewish Theological Seminary.

Website

[Columbia Health BASICS program \(Morningside\)](#) ^[3]

[Read more](#) ^[2]

Student Health Service BASICS program (CUIMC) ^[4]

The BASICS program is designed to assist students in examining their own drinking and substance use behavior. The program consists of two 1-hour sessions with a provider and a brief assessment survey taken by the student after the first session. Students who participate in the program select their own objectives, focusing on reducing their higher-risk behaviors and limiting the potential harmful consequences of their use.

Phone

(212) 305-3400

Website

[Student Health Service BASICS program \(CUIMC\)](#) ^[5]

[Read more](#) ^[4]

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If you are in an urgent situation, please [visit our Emergency page](#) to view a list of 24 hour support services and hotlines.

Source URL: <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/fact-sheet/alcohol-lowering-risk>

Links

[1] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/fact-sheet/alcohol-lowering-risk>

[2] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/resource/columbia-health-basics-program-morningside>

[3] <https://health.columbia.edu/content/basics>

[4] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/resource/student-health-service-basics-program-cuimc>

[5] <http://cumc.columbia.edu/student-health/aims/basics>