

Some sobering facts about alcohol



Binge drinking could lead to slurred speech, confusion, memory issues and loss of balance, while drinking heavily on a regular basis could result in severe health risks. Long-term alcohol abuse can lead to malnutrition, liver diseases, digestive tract disorders and nerve damage. ST FILE PHOTO

🕒 PUBLISHED 2 HOURS AGO

Many usher in each new year with a generous swig, but too much can harm you or even cause lasting damage. Joyce Teo finds out more.



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Christmas might be over but, lest you think you can drink yourself silly into the new year, read on and see why it is time to sober up.

Drinking excessive amounts of alcohol or binge drinking could lead to slurred speech, confusion, memory issues, loss of balance and more.

Severe alcohol intoxication could even lead to death, said Dr Tan Poh Seng, a consultant in the division of gastroenterology and hepatology at National University Hospital.

Binge drinking is defined as downing, over the course of two hours, at least five drinks for men and at least four drinks for women.

Drinking heavily on a regular basis can result in severe health risks.

Dr Tan said long-term alcohol abuse can lead to malnutrition, liver diseases, digestive tract disorders and nerve damage. It can also increase the risk of certain types of cancer, such as those of the pancreas and liver, he added.

Here are some things to note about alcohol consumption.

HOW MUCH CAN I DRINK?

Men should drink no more than two standard drinks a day, and women, no more than one, according to the Health Promotion Board.

A standard alcoholic drink is a 330ml can of regular beer, a 175ml glass of wine or a 35ml nip of spirit.

The amount of alcohol consumed, and not the type of alcoholic drink, is what will affect you.

But one is more likely to drink to excess with spirit, than with wine or beer, said gastroenterologist Tan Chi Chiu from Gastroenterology & Medicine International at Gleneagles Medical Centre.

Daily alcohol misuse is even more harmful than the occasional binge drinking episodes, he said.

Acute exposure to alcohol followed by a period of zero alcohol use allows liver cells to recover to some extent before the next intake. Frequent drinking slowly but steadily leads to irreversible liver damage, he said.

Still, binge drinking is a common cause of alcohol poisoning - a medical emergency where the victim is so inebriated that he can enter a deep coma and suffer other symptoms.

CAN TEENAGERS DRINK A LITTLE BIT OF ALCOHOL?

Teenagers should not be encouraged to start drinking alcohol, said Dr Yim Heng Boon, a senior consultant gastroenterologist and hepatologist at Mount Elizabeth Novena Specialist Centre.

"Their younger age, relative immaturity and smaller size might render them more easily susceptible to the side effects of alcohol."

Many countries have a legal age limit for alcohol consumption, usually 18 to 21 . Singapore's is 18.

WHAT'S THE BEST WAY TO AVOID A HANGOVER?

A hangover arises from a combination of different "congeners" or organic chemicals in drinks, such as liquors; and dehydration, which results from drinking too much alcohol and not enough water, said Dr Tan Chi Chiu.

On a night of heavy drinking, drink plenty of plain water in between alcoholic drinks, he advised.

This also helps to moderate alcohol intake, as the stomach is kept partially full with water, he said.

Alcohol is a diuretic, which means it makes one urinate, so the body gets dehydrated easily.

Avoid drinking on an empty stomach as the alcohol will get absorbed at a faster pace, said Dr Yim.

You might have heard of this "cure" - taking paracetamol at night to prevent a hangover the following day. Whether this works depends on the amount of alcohol consumed and the person's liver reserves and function, said Dr Yim.

I'M HAVING A HANGOVER. WHAT CAN I DO TO REVERSE IT?

The first thing to do is rehydrate yourself, said Dr Tan Chi Chiu.

"Drink plain water until the sensation of thirst is gone, and you are able to pass clear, light-coloured urine in good amounts."

Caffeine is often said to help, so people like to drink coffee, while paracetamol can ease headaches and antacids can soothe gastric pain or heartburn, he said.

WILL ALCOHOL MAKE ME FAT?

Yes, if you drink too much of it, because alcoholic drinks are high in calories.

Ms Bibi Chia, principal dietitian at Raffles Diabetes & Endocrine Centre, suggests alternating alcoholic drinks with low-calorie non-alcoholic drinks, such as soda water or tea.

Here, she offers a quick glimpse of the amount of calories you are piling on with your drinks:

- Wine: A 175ml glass of red wine can have 120 calories, which is equivalent to a slice of sponge cake. White wine generally has slightly more calories. A 175ml glass has 130 calories - it is the same as eating a small bag of crisps.

- Beer: A pint of beer can contain 170-200 calories, which is about what you get in a glazed ring doughnut. Light beer has fewer calories.

- Others: A pint of cider, a drink that is growing in popularity here, has about 200 calories.

A 25ml serving of spirits, such as vodka or gin, has 55 calories.

ISN'T RED WINE GOOD FOR US?

Alcohol is a toxin, strictly speaking, although some people believe that moderate alcohol consumption has health benefits.

It probably started from reports about the French Paradox years ago, said Dr Yim. Although the French diet is rich in saturated fat, the French have a relatively lower incidence of ischaemic heart disease.

"Subsequent studies suggested that red wine - a favourite of the French people - contains resveratrol and other flavonoid polyphenols that might be factors in this paradox," he said.

However, he added, "studies involving food are notoriously known to be conflicting, and there are also studies that tend to disagree with these explanations".

WILL HEAVY DRINKERS FEEL UNWELL IF THEY STOP DRINKING SUDDENLY?

Some people could experience withdrawal symptoms that range from mild to severe, said Dr Tan Poh Seng.

Mild symptoms include tremors, a loss of appetite, headaches and mild anxiety. Severe reactions include fever, sweating, hallucinations and confusion.

Such withdrawal symptoms could kick in within the first six to eight hours after a heavy drinker reduces or stops the consumption of alcohol. But they usually go away after five to seven days, he added.

It is important for a heavy or regular drinker to see a doctor if he experiences such symptoms after cutting down or stopping alcohol consumption.

Severe withdrawal symptoms could be dangerous, he said.

•**Additional reporting by Ng Wan Ching**