



# The Truth About Holiday Spirits

Many of us look forward to celebrations during the holidays, a time when some people are more likely to drink beyond their limits than at other times of the year. Some will suffer adverse consequences that range from fights to falls to traffic crashes. Sadly, we often put ourselves and others at risk because we don't understand how alcohol affects us during an evening of celebratory drinking.

## Myths Persist

Despite the potential dangers, myths about drinking persist, which—for some—can prove fatal. Scientific studies supported by the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism provide important information that challenges these widespread, yet incorrect, beliefs about how quickly alcohol affects the body and how long the effects of drinking last.

## Alcohol's Effects Begin Quickly

Holiday revelers may not recognize that critical decision-making abilities and driving-related skills are already diminished long before a person shows physical signs of intoxication.

Initially, alcohol acts as a stimulant, so people who drink may feel upbeat and excited. But don't be fooled. Alcohol soon decreases inhibitions and judgment, and can lead to reckless decisions.

As we consume more alcohol, reaction time suffers and behavior becomes poorly controlled and sometimes even aggressive—leading to fights and other types of violence. Continued drinking causes the slurred speech and loss of balance that we typically associate with being drunk. At these levels and above, alcohol can also cause blackouts—which are when a person does not remember what happened while he or she was intoxicated. At higher levels, alcohol acts as a depressant, which causes the drinker to become sleepy and in some cases pass out. At even higher levels, drinkers face the danger of life-threatening alcohol overdose due to the suppression of vital life functions.



## Even When Drinking Stops—Alcohol’s Effects Do Not

During an evening of drinking, it’s also easy to misjudge how long alcohol’s effects last. For example, many people believe that they will begin to sober up—and be able to drive safely—once they stop drinking and have a cup of coffee. The truth is that alcohol continues to affect the brain and body long after the last drink has been finished. Even after someone stops drinking, alcohol in the stomach and intestine continues to enter the bloodstream, resulting in impaired judgment and coordination for hours.

## Before You Celebrate—Plan Ahead

Of course, we don’t intend to harm anyone when we celebrate during the holiday season. Yet, violence and traffic fatalities associated with alcohol misuse persist, and myths about drinking live on—even though scientific studies have documented how alcohol affects the brain and body.

Because individuals differ, the specific effects of alcohol on an individual will vary. But certain facts are clear—there’s no way to make good decisions when you are intoxicated and there’s no way to sober up faster.

So, this holiday season, do not underestimate the effects of alcohol. Don’t believe you can beat them, or they may beat you.

Here are some tips to keep in mind if you host a holiday gathering:

- » Offer a variety of nonalcoholic drinks—water, juices, sparkling sodas. Nonalcoholic drinks help counteract the dehydrating effects of alcohol. Also, the other fluids may slow the rate of alcohol absorption into the body and reduce the peak alcohol concentration in the blood.
- » Provide a variety of healthy foods and snacks. Food can slow the absorption of alcohol and reduce the peak level of alcohol in the body by about one-third. It can also minimize stomach irritation and gastrointestinal distress the following day.
- » Help your guests get home safely—use designated drivers and taxis. Anyone getting behind the wheel of a car should not have any alcohol.
- » If you are a parent, understand the underage drinking laws—and set a good example.

Have a safe holiday season!

**For more information on celebrating your holidays safely and tips for cutting back, please visit:**  
<https://www.RethinkingDrinking.niaaa.nih.gov>

## Sobering Up—Myths and Facts

**Myth:** Drink coffee. Caffeine will sober you up.

**Fact:** Caffeine may help with drowsiness but not with the effects of alcohol on decision-making or coordination. The body needs time to metabolize (break down) alcohol and then to return to normal. Also, when caffeine wears off, your body will need to deal with post-caffeine sleepiness. There are no quick cures—only time will help.

**Myth:** You can drive as long as you are not slurring your words or acting erratically.

**Fact:** The coordination needed for driving is compromised long before you show signs of intoxication and your reaction time is slowed. Plus, the sedative effects of alcohol increase your risk of nodding off or losing attention behind the wheel.

**Myth:** The warm feeling you get from drinking alcohol insulates you from the cold of winter. When you’re drinking, there’s no need to wear a coat when it’s cold outside.

**Fact:** Alcohol widens the tiny blood vessels right under the skin, so they quickly fill with warm blood. This makes you feel warm or hot, and can cause your skin to flush and perspire. But your body temperature is actually dropping, because while alcohol is pulling warmth from your body’s core to the skin surface, it is also depressing the area of your brain that controls temperature regulation. In cold environments, this can lead to hypothermia. So, wear a coat when it’s cold outside, particularly if you are drinking alcohol.



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