

# the RED CUP

Q&A



separating alcohol fact from fiction  
EVERY TUESDAY IN THE DAILY WILDCAT

## Q Why is alcohol a depressant drug?

**A.** On the surface it might seem strange that alcohol is categorized as a depressant. How can something that makes you feel so good be a depressant? First, let's not confuse a depressant drug with your mood or being depressed. Depressants are only one of several drug categories that include stimulants, hallucinogens, opiates, inhalants, etc. Also, a depressant drug is not to be confused with an anti-depressant medication. They are two different things.

A depressant substance is one that slows down or inhibits the functions of the central nervous system (CNS); basically slowing down brain activity that in turn relaxes your body and mind. In other words, they produce a depressant effect on the central nervous system by inhibiting the brain's ability to produce stimulating chemicals. Drinking initially feels good, but as more alcohol is added to the CNS it gives a signal to the brain to relax even more. It becomes a continuum of diminishing coordination, slurring speech, cognitive and judgment impairments, etc. Most people stop drinking here. If not, more alcohol signals the CNS to depress your heart and breathing rates to a point that, without intervention, can lead to alcohol poisoning. Basically the depressant effect is all about dosage; the more consumed, the greater the effect.

Paradoxically, there is a misconception that alcohol is a stimulant because of the way the depressant part of alcohol disinhibits brain functions, leading drinkers to do things they wouldn't normally do sober. For example, too much alcohol can lead you to say embarrassing things, jump in the Old Main fountain (naked), get into sexual situations that are regretted after the fact, or other risk-taking behaviors.

While it may seem odd to lump alcohol with the other depressants (tranquilizers, sleeping aids, barbiturates), they all share the characteristic of sedating effects.



wildfact

**50% of UA students set a limit on the number of drinks they have.**  
(2010 Health & Wellness Survey, n=2,931)



Got a question about alcohol?

Email it to [redcup@email.arizona.edu](mailto:redcup@email.arizona.edu)



[www.health.arizona.edu](http://www.health.arizona.edu)

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