

the RED CUP Q&A



separating alcohol fact from fiction
EVERY TUESDAY IN THE DAILY WILDCAT

Q Why is alcohol socially acceptable when it seems to be a huge cause of mortality in the U.S.?

A. Despite its association with motor vehicle fatalities, sexual assaults, unintentional injuries and a host of other health concerns, many choose to drink. For those who imbibe and do so in a way that lessens these risks, the reasons are obvious: alcohol clearly has benefits which outweigh its costs.

In the long list of substances we humans have consumed to alter or enhance our reality, alcohol ranks at the top for both its long history and widespread use. Few drugs can match its dual nature: is it a social lubricant that brings people together for good, or a menace that leaves addiction, violence, disease, and untimely death in its wake? The answer is, of course, that it's both. As anthropologist David Mandelbaum noted back in 1965, alcohol "may be either a sacred or profane act, depending on the context."¹ In other words, wine may be a holy sacrament, or simply a means to getting drunk.

How alcohol is used, as well as how it is perceived can make a difference. Some cross-cultural research has identified traits associated with non-abusive drinking practices and low rates of alcoholism. These behaviors include drinking that: 1) is celebratory and inclusive of non-drinkers, 2) is done in conjunction with eating, 3) is not considered an escape from personal anxiety or difficult personal problems, 4) occurs with both sexes and across generations, 5) is not considered a "rite of passage" and, 6) does not condone inappropriate, aggressive or violent behavior in conjunction with alcohol use.²

For societies as well as individuals, it's both the "how" and the "how much" that largely predicts whether alcohol's benefits are worth its collective costs. As the drug of choice in America, alcohol will always be around – the question is how we choose to use it.

¹ Mandelbaum, David G. (1965). Alcohol and Culture. *Current Anthropology*, 6(3), 281 - 292

² Zinberg, N.E., "Alcohol Addiction: Toward a More Comprehensive Definition," pp. 97-127 in Bean, M.H., and Zinberg, N.E., eds., *Dynamic Approaches to the Understanding and Treatment of Alcoholism*, Free Press, New York, 1981, p. 110.



wildfact

37% of UA students did not use alcohol in the past 30 days.
(2010 Health & Wellness Survey, n=2,931)



Got a question about alcohol?

Email it to redcup@email.arizona.edu



www.health.arizona.edu

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