

# the RED CUP

Q&A



separating alcohol fact from fiction  
EVERY TUESDAY IN THE DAILY WILDCAT

## Q How does drinking lead to hallucinations?

**A.** You are likely referring to alcoholic hallucinosis, a condition that occurs in a small percentage of problem drinkers who are going through withdrawal. Hallucinations are not necessarily dangerous in this case, but one should seek medical care for alcohol withdrawal as other symptoms such as seizures can be life threatening. This process occurs in people who have been drinking for many years, and is not generally seen in the college-age population. Though occasionally drinkers will experience a hallucination, alcohol by itself does not cause one to hallucinate.

**What exactly is a hallucination?** The clinical definition is that it's a perception in the absence of a stimulus and can occur in any sensory area: visual, auditory, tactile or olfactory (smell) are the most common. In other words, you "see" something that isn't there, "hear" things that no one else hears or "feel" insects crawling on your skin.

**What causes hallucinations?** Hallucinations occur when environmental, emotional, or physical factors cause the mechanism within the brain that helps to distinguish conscious perceptions from internal, memory-based perceptions to misfire. Hypotheses include a disturbance of brain structure or neurotransmitters. A mild form of hallucination is known as a disturbance, and includes things like seeing movement in peripheral vision, or hearing faint noises and/or voices. This is a more common experience than a full-blown hallucination.

One thing to keep in mind is that hallucinations can occur as a function of a psychiatric disorder and these tend to begin in the teens and early twenties, just when adolescents are likely to begin drinking. It's not unusual to try to "self-medicate" away the symptoms of a mental health problem, but in fact, drinking only complicates the symptoms. Hallucinations can also occur as a result of extreme fatigue or stress.

Drug-induced hallucinations are an entirely different column topic.



**wildfact**

**Myth buster: the alcoholic beverage Absinthe does not cause hallucinations.**



**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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