

the **RED CUP** Q&A



separating alcohol fact from fiction
EVERY TUESDAY IN THE DAILY WILDCAT

Q Why is alcohol a drug?

A. One dictionary defines a drug as “something that causes addiction or a marked change in consciousness.” Alcohol falls in the category of a central nervous system (CNS) depressant. It interferes with the activity of various brain centers and neurochemical systems, sometimes with seemingly paradoxical results. At lower doses it leads to reduced inhibitions. At very high doses it can suppress CNS function to the point of causing respiratory arrest and death.

It's all about chemistry: the brain contains neurotransmitters that communicate between different brain cells. These chemical messengers are molecular substances that can affect mood, appetite, anxiety, sleep, heart rate, aggression, fear, and many other psychological and physical states. College students drink to socialize and feel that alcohol helps lower their inhibitions, “making” them more social (talkative, outgoing, fun).^{*} However, if the brain becomes dependent upon the substance to release the good neurotransmitters, the drinker can become dependent.

So why do some people say alcohol is not a drug? Perhaps, because it's legal if you're 21; perhaps, because alcohol is more socially and culturally acceptable than illegal drugs. Confusion is exacerbated by health literature and professionals referring to substances as “alcohol and other drugs.” Alcohol has been called one of the world's most devastating drugs in terms of health and social consequences (second only to nicotine).

Drugs are a complicated topic to talk about, for many reasons – almost any drug can be fatal if used improperly, and psychological and social effects are more difficult to quantify than physical harms.

^{*}Balanced Placebo Design research from A. Marlatt at the University of Washington demonstrated that the desired effects from alcohol consumption were not actually due to the alcohol itself, but rather the belief, or expectation, that the beverage contained alcohol.

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Alcohol, tobacco, and cannabis are the most commonly used drugs.

(Global Drug Survey, 2014)



Got a question about alcohol? Email it to redcup@email.arizona.edu



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