

Alcohol: How It All Adds Up

If you choose to drink alcohol, you should have as much information as you can so you can drink responsibly. This fact sheet should help you make more informed decisions.

Alcohol is alcohol is alcohol.

It does not matter whether the beverage of choice is beer, wine, a wine cooler, a cocktail, or a mixed drink. What matters is only one thing: the amount of alcohol in the drink.

Standard serving sizes of *all alcohol beverages* — beer, wine, and liquor — are equal in alcohol strength and in their effect on the body. They all contain the same amount of alcohol.



Says Who?

The current Dietary Guidelines for Americans, published by the U.S. Departments of Health and Human Services and Agriculture, define a drink of alcohol as “12 oz. of regular beer, 5 oz. of wine, and 1.5 oz. of 80-proof distilled spirits.”

Yet, a survey by Yankelovich Partners showed that only 39 percent of Americans know that these servings all contain the same amount of alcohol. Fifty-three percent believe a typical mixed drink, like a Bloody Mary or a rum and Coke, is more “potent” than a 5-oz. glass of wine, even though the alcohol content is the same.

In the same survey, 62 percent of Americans polled said that understanding the alcohol equivalency of standard serving sizes of different types of drinks is helpful to them in making decisions about responsible drinking. And experts agree. For example, the Journal of the American Medical Association has stated, “...it is also important to dispel the myth that there are differences between ‘hard’ liquor and beer or wine. ...” Further, the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration explains that “Alcohol is alcohol. Beer has the same effect as straight scotch. One 12-oz. beer has as much alcohol as a 1.5-oz. shot of whiskey or a 5-oz. glass of wine.”

How Could That Be?

One ounce of beer contains less alcohol than one ounce of spirits, but the standard serving of beer is a 12-oz. can or bottle.

Here’s how it adds up: Beer contains between 4 and 7 percent alcohol by volume, with the average being 5 percent alcohol by volume. 12 oz. x 5 percent alcohol by volume = 0.6 oz. of alcohol/serving.

Here’s how it adds up: The same is true of wine. The typical serving of wine is 5 oz., which generally contains between 11 and 13 percent alcohol by volume. 5 oz. x 12 percent alcohol by volume = 0.6 oz. of alcohol/serving.

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Here's how it adds up: Liquor (distilled spirits) generally contains 40 percent alcohol by volume. Spirits are most often consumed in mixed drinks with 1.5-oz. spirits. Sometimes spirits (vodka, gin, scotch, bourbon, etc.) are mixed with seltzer, club soda, or juice. Sometime they are served "straight" or "on the rocks." No matter how spirits are consumed, a typical serving (1.5 oz.) of 80 proof (40 percent by volume) distilled spirits has the same amount of alcohol as standard servings of beer and wine.

1.5 oz. x 40 percent alcohol by volume = 0.6 oz. of alcohol/serving. This means that typical servings of beer, wine, or spirits each contain approximately ½ oz. of alcohol.

Alcohol and Medications Don't Mix

Besides learning the facts of alcohol equivalence, remember this important point: alcohol and many medications don't mix. Drinking beer, wine or liquor in combination with such medications as pain killers, allergy medicines, cough and cold remedies, and a number of other commonly used over-the-counter or prescription drugs can be extremely dangerous. As the first line of defense, **READ THE LABEL** to determine if the medication carries a specific warning about consuming alcohol. And to be on the safe side, avoid alcohol beverages while taking any drug. Ask your health providers or pharmacist about any medication you take if you plan on drinking beer, wine or distilled spirits. And also ask about mixing dietary supplements or herbals with alcohol.

Designate a Driver

Government statistics estimate that 40 percent of motor vehicle fatalities involve alcohol use by either a driver or non-driver. So when you are planning to go to a party or socialize with friends, play it safe and agree upon a designated driver. Don't be fooled into thinking that having beer or wine is not drinking.

Putting it All Together

Many adults enjoy consuming beer, wine, or distilled spirits. But to do this responsibly, remember the math: standard sizes of these drinks all contain equal amounts of alcohol. So, don't kid yourself into thinking beer or wine is "safer" or less "potent" than the "hard stuff." In your body, all alcohol is the same.

With this important fact in mind, the following are some basic do's and don'ts that are an essential part of safe drinking:

- Do drink responsibly and in moderation.
- Do have a designated driver.
- Don't drink alcohol if you're on medication — prescription and non-prescription.
- Do be aware that a typical serving of beer, wine, or spirits contains the same amount of alcohol.
- Don't drink alcohol if you are pregnant or nursing.
- Do remember, the legal purchase age in the United States is 21.

When it comes to drinking alcohol, the old adage is true:

It doesn't matter what you drink, it's really *how much* that counts.

Now Test Yourself

1) It's okay for a designated driver to have just a couple of beers or a glass or two of wine, as long as he or she doesn't have any cocktails. T or F?

2) A person who drinks one glass of wine every half-hour will be less affected than someone who drinks one vodka tonic at the same rate. T or F?

3) A 1.5 oz. "shot" of tequila is stronger than one 12 oz. can of beer or a 5 oz. glass of chardonnay. T or F?

The answer to all these questions is False.