Alcohol, drugs, sex & HIV

FAST FACTS

• When drunk or high we take risks we might not otherwise take or remember, this includes sexual risks.

• There are simple precautions you can take to avoid compromising your sexual health when you are drinking alcohol or taking drugs.

• If you're worried that you've put yourself your sexual health at risk as a result of consuming drugs or alcohol, taking a STI and HIV test might help put your mind at ease.

• Support is available for anyone struggling to control their drinking or drug taking habits.

Having a few drinks or taking drugs can make you feel happy, relaxed and more confident. But sometimes mixing sex with alcohol and drugs can affect your sexual health and overall wellbeing. This is because when you’re drunk or high you may feel a lack of control and do things that you wouldn’t usually do.

Here we look at the risks and how you can minimise them, while still having fun.

What are the key risks of mixing alcohol, drugs and sex?

Sex should be a fun and pleasurable experience, but consuming alcohol or other drugs excessively can have a big impact on your ability to make decisions about your sexual health. This may make you more likely to:
• forget to use a condom or female condom
• not realise if someone is wearing a condom or if it breaks or slips off
• not be able to consent or ask for the type of sex you would like to have
• not remember having sex or unprotected sex
• be unaware of someone spiking your drink
• have problems with your sexual performance, for example erection or ejaculation difficulties
• engage in more risky sexual activities that you would not otherwise consider
• inject drugs with a used needle, risking HIV infection and other blood-borne viruses.

Many of these risks that come from drugs and alcohol increase your chances of getting sexually transmitted infections (STIs), including HIV.

**If you think you may have put yourself at risk you should speak to a sexual health professional as soon as possible for advice.** A lot of STIs and HIV don’t have any early symptoms, so for peace of mind, it’s good to get tested regularly if you’re sexually active.

If you're worried about HIV infection, find out everything you need to know in our HIV Transmission and Prevention section.

If you feel you've been coerced into having sex that you don’t want to have – this is called ‘non-consensual sex’ and is a form of physical assault. Whether you were drunk or high at the time or not, sexual assault is never acceptable and is never your fault.

**How can I enjoy alcohol safely?**

Alcohol is legal in most countries, but it is good to be aware of recommended government guidelines – these can help you understand what is considered a safe amount of alcohol (units) to drink.

Eating before you go out and limiting the amount of alcohol you consume in one sitting will help to keep you at a steady level while drinking. You may also want to consider alternating between a soft drink and an alcoholic one while you are out.

Remember to never accept a drink from someone you don’t know or trust.

**How can I stay safe while taking drugs?**

There are many recreational drugs that are available, some of which are illegal, such as cocaine and ecstasy. Others are legal but banned from recreational use because of dangerous health implications when misused. These are also known as 'legal highs' and can produce similar effects to illegal drugs.

They may take the form of prescription drugs, like opioids, or drugs that contain one or more chemical substances, such as poppers. Other drugs such as cannabis, might be legal in some countries while illegal in others.

Here are a few ways you can stay safe while taking drugs:

• When injecting drugs always use clean needles and equipment. Sharing needles to inject drugs puts you at risk of HIV infection and other blood-borne viruses such as Hepatitis C.
• If snorting drugs, avoid sharing or passing around notes or straws as Hepatitis C can be passed on in this way.
• It’s often difficult to know the strength of illicit drugs so, to limit the risk of overdosing, it’s safest to take just a small amount of substance at a time.
Many drugs can reduce your sexual inhibition. If you’re planning to engage in Chemsex (otherwise known as party and play or PNP) and have sex on drugs, then be prepared with lube and plenty of condoms for protection. You may also want look into taking pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) as an additional way of protecting yourself from HIV.

**Staying in control**

There are some general precautions you can take to avoid putting yourself in potentially unsafe situations when you’re out enjoying yourself:

- Make sure you’re around people you trust who will not put pressure on you to do something that puts your sexual health at risk.
- If you leave a party with someone, always let a friend know where you’re going and who you will be with.
- Using a condom or female condom is the best way to prevent HIV, STIs and pregnancy. You don’t need to rely on just one form of protection, but remember that the contraceptive pill won’t protect you from an STI or HIV, and PrEP will only prevent HIV not other STIs, so it’s good to carry condoms and dental dams with you just in case.

**Need some support?**

If you’re worried that you’re struggling to control your drinking or drug taking then it’s important to speak to a healthcare professional, counsellor or contact a helpline that can offer you the right advice and support.

*Photo credit: ©iStock.com/Courtney Keating. Photos are used for illustrative purposes. They do not imply any health status or behaviour on the part of the people in the photo.*

---

**Sources:**

- Drink Aware (2015) ‘Alcohol unit guidelines’
- Talk to Frank ‘Legal Highs’ [accessed May 2015]
- The Loop ‘Crush, Dab, Wait’ [accessed June 2017]
- The LGBT Foundation ‘Chemsex’ [accessed June 2017’]
- RAINN ‘Alcohol safety accessed’ [June 2017]

**Next full review:** 01 July 2020

**Last full review:** 13 July 2017