Alcohol, drugs, sex & HIV

FAST FACTS

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

• There are simple things you can do to protect your sexual health when you are drinking alcohol or taking drugs.

• If you're worried that you've put your sexual health at risk, 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 if you mix sex with alcohol and drugs you may lose control and do things you wouldn't usually do, putting your sexual health and overall wellbeing at risk.

Here we look at the risks of combining alcohol, drugs and sex and how you can minimise them while still having fun.

For information on alcohol and drugs when living with HIV, see our taking care of yourself page.

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

Sex should be pleasurable and you should be free to experiment and do what you enjoy. But if you are drunk or high it can be difficult to decide what is right for you. You may:
• forget to use an external or internal condom
• not realise if someone isn't 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
• not realise someone has spiked your drink
• engage in risky sexual activities that you would not usually consider
• inject drugs with a used needle.

Many of these behaviours increase your risk 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. HIV, and many other STIs, 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.

Being coerced into having sex that you don’t want to have is called ‘non-consensual sex’. It is a form of physical assault and a crime. Equally if you are passed out, asleep or so out of it that you cannot make decisions for yourself then you cannot give consent. Whatever anyone does to you at that time is non-consensual. Sexual assault is never acceptable and is never your fault, whether you were drunk or high at the time or not. If you think this has happened to you, you should seek emotional and practical support.

How can I enjoy alcohol safely?

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

Eating beforehand and limiting the amount of alcohol you drink at one time will help to keep you in control. You could also alternate 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 available, some of which are illegal, such as cocaine and ecstasy. Others are legal but banned from recreational use because they can damage your health if they are misused. These are known as ‘legal highs’. They can be prescription drugs, like opioids, or drugs that contain chemical substances, such as poppers. Other drugs, including cannabis, are legal in some countries but illegal in others.

There are a few ways you can stay safe while taking drugs.

• Always use clean needles and equipment when injecting drugs and don’t let someone else inject you. Sharing needles puts you at risk of HIV infection and other viruses such as Hepatitis
• If snorting drugs, avoid sharing notes or straws as Hepatitis C can be passed on in this way.
• It’s often difficult to know how strong drugs are so just take a small amount of a substance at a time to limit the risk of overdosing.
• Many drugs can reduce your sexual inhibitions. If you’re planning to engage in chemsex (also known as chemfun, party and play or PNP) or have sex on drugs, then be prepared with lube and plenty of condoms. You may also want to look into taking pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) as an extra way of protecting yourself from HIV.

Staying in control

Here are some tips to avoid putting yourself in potentially unsafe situations when you’re out enjoying yourself.

• Make sure you’re with people you trust who won’t pressure you to do something that puts your sexual health at risk.
• Decide while you are sober what your boundaries are and what you are comfortable doing sexually.
• If you are meeting someone you don’t know (for example someone you met online) or if you leave a party with someone, always let a friend know where you are going and who you will be with.
• Choose the right protection for you and bear in mind it may be more than one. Remember the contraceptive pill won’t protect you from an STI or HIV, and PrEP will only prevent HIV, not other STIs. Using an internal or external condom is the best way to prevent HIV, STIs and pregnancy.

Need some support?

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

HELP US HELP OTHERS

Avert.org is helping to prevent the spread of HIV and improve sexual health by giving people trusted, up-to date information.

We provide all this for FREE, but it takes time and money to keep Avert.org going.

Can you support us and protect our future?

Every contribution helps, no matter how small.
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Sources:
- Terrence Higgins Trust (2019) 'Alcohol and smoking'
- NAM (2016) 'Alcohol'
- AIDSinfo (2019) 'HIV and Drug and Alcohol Users'