



ALCOHOL AND HEALTH

ALCOHOL AND SEX



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INTRODUCTION

Attraction and alcohol seem the perfect pairing. Whether a relationship is just getting started or already in full bloom, alcohol is often part of the equation, as many people use it to relax and feel more comfortable. Rarely does a romantic encounter take place without a glass of something in hand, because alcohol eases amorous or sexual interactions with long-time beloveds and new conquests alike.

The disinhibiting effect of alcohol may, in fact, help lead to intimacy; on the other hand, abusive drinking can lead straight to disaster, in terms of both the relationship and sex.

When taken in more than moderate amounts, alcohol can generate a series of problems—in particular, it can make the intoxicated person more vulnerable to various types of sexual violence. A study involving 9,284 Quebecers working or studying at a university showed that more than one third (36.9%) had experienced at least one kind of sexual victimization on campus, and nearly half of these incidents had occurred “during social activities or festivities,”¹ meaning at a party, a happy hour, or other social event, i.e. where people usually drink alcohol.

Alcohol is certainly neither the primary nor the sole factor in sexual assault,² but it is often present during unwanted sex or sexual violence. From 2008 to 2013, nearly 75% of those who had been sexually assaulted had alcohol in their blood when the crime was committed, making alcohol the most commonly found substance in blood samples taken in such cases.³

This *Éduc’alcool* report on the potential influence of alcohol on sexual relations is based on the most recent scientific research. Simply and concisely, it presents the data and discusses the most widely understood issues related to drinking and its impact on sexual function and risky sexual behaviours. It also tackles the delicate subject of the connection between alcohol and sexual violence. However, this publication does not cover issues specific to certain groups, such as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender (LGBT) people, each of which would deserve a report of their own.

Finally, the conclusion reached by this report comes as no surprise: once again, moderation is always in good taste.

¹ Bergeron et al. (2016).

² Benbouriche M. (2016).

³ Sauvé M-R. (2014).

ALCOHOL AND SEX

The aphrodisiac and disinhibiting effects of alcohol

People often wonder about the nature of the connection between drinking and sex. Does drinking alcohol promote sexual behaviour?

One study of university students showed that the likelihood of sexual behaviour—from a simple kiss to sexual intercourse—increased when people drank alcohol, especially if they drank excessively.⁴ Another study found that drinking alcohol was significantly related to the prevalence of occasional sexual relations, known as “hookups.”⁵ This is hardly news to anyone, since it is widely believed that alcohol makes you horny!

Experiments suggest that the relationship between alcohol and sexual arousal is more a cultural construct than a pharmacological reality: because people expect alcohol to be an aphrodisiac, so it becomes one.

Such expectations are surely not unrelated to the fact that alcohol advertising occasionally links drinking to sexual attraction.⁶

In 2007, researchers⁷ designed a scale for measuring the disinhibiting effects of alcohol. According to this Drinking-Induced Disinhibition Scale, which was developed and validated with university students, drinking alcohol results in three levels of disinhibition: the first is social and euphoric disinhibition, which makes the drinker feel more sociable, and even aroused; next comes dysphoric disinhibition, leading the drinker to express strong feelings of sadness; lastly, sexual disinhibition reduces the perception of risks associated with sexual activity. Of these three types of disinhibition, the one most frequently associated with excessive drinking is sexual disinhibition.

Sexual disinhibition caused by alcohol is not always a good thing. In one New Zealand study, 8% of the adult men and 15% of the adult women surveyed said they had drunk alcohol before or during a sexual encounter, and among those respondents, 14% of the men and 12% of the women also said they had experienced regret afterwards.⁸ When it comes to sex, what seems like a good idea under the influence of alcohol may not seem so once the effect has subsided. A “yes” at the end of a well-lubricated evening might well have been a “no” when sober.



⁴ Patrick M. E., Maggs J. L., Lefkowitz E. S. (2015).

⁵ Dvorak R.D et al. (2016).

⁶ Hastings G. et al. (2010).

⁷ Leeman R. F., Toll B. A., Volpicelli J. R. (2007).

⁸ Connor J.L., Kydd R.M., Dickson N.P. (2015).



Drinking and sexual function

Alcohol does indeed have a reputation for occasionally being an aphrodisiac that can improve or promote sexual interactions. But what about its real impact on sexual function?

In this report, you will find the terms “moderate drinking” and “excessive drinking.” The studies cited sometimes define exactly what is meant by moderation and excess, but not always. Moderate drinking can mean different things for different people, but excessive drinking is generally considered to be four or more drinks for a women – five or more for a man – on a single occasion.

- To avoid intoxication and the associated complications, women should have no more than three drinks, and men no more than four drinks, on any single occasion.



Impact on men

The negative effects of heavy drinking on sexual function were first demonstrated during laboratory experiments with animals. Researchers observed that chronic exposure to alcohol promoted sexual dysfunction. In fact, alcohol contributes to a significant decline in testosterone levels, as well as in the quantity of elastic fibres and smooth muscle cells in the penis, which are necessary to initiate and maintain an erection.^{9, 10}

In humans, similar effects have been observed: alcohol has a notable physiological impact on the male erection, as measured by changes in the circumference of the penis. However, contextual factors, such as the amount of alcohol consumed and the individual's will to maximize or suppress sexual arousal will affect the impact^{11, 12} A study of men being treated for sexual dysfunction has shown that when those who have at least four drinks a day were compared to those who abstain from drinking, or who have three drinks or less a day, the heavier drinkers reported lower-quality sexual relations with their partners and reduced sexual desire—as perceived by their partners—they had lower levels of stimulating hormones (prolactin and TSH), and had difficulty obtaining or were unable to obtain and maintain an erection.¹³

Other research has been done with very heavy drinkers in treatment centres for men with substance abuse problems.

With regard to sexual satisfaction in general, one study, conducted in Turkey, revealed significant differences between subjects who drank alcohol and the control group, but it found no differences with regard to erection, orgasm and sexual desire.¹⁴ In another study, however, 72% of the men being treated for alcohol dependence complained of various problems regarding sexual function.¹⁵ Among the 12 problems studied,¹⁶ the ones most frequently reported were premature ejaculation, a decline in sexual desire, and erectile dysfunction. The authors of the study also observed that the likelihood of experiencing one of these problems increased with the number of drinks consumed per day. This can be explained by the impact excessive drinking has on gonadotropins, which are hormones essential to sexual function.

Consuming large quantities of alcohol thus appears to have an adverse impact on sexual function, but moderate drinking seems to be somewhat favourable to erectile function. Over the long term, moderate amounts of alcohol could have a beneficial impact on high-density lipoproteins, which, in turn, increases the bioavailability of nitric oxide, which promotes blood circulation in the penis.¹⁷ Therefore, in order to prevent or reduce erectile dysfunction, the researchers recommended that men refrain from drinking excessively, limiting their alcohol intake to a maximum of two or three drinks a day.

⁹ Gan X.G. et al. (2007).

¹⁰ Yesili C. et al. (2006).

¹¹ Yesili W.H. et al. (2006).

¹² George, W. H. et al. (2008).

¹³ Boddi V. et al. (2010).

¹⁴ Kumsar N.A., Kumsar S., Dilbaz, N. (2016).

¹⁵ Arackal B. S., Benegal, V. (2007).

¹⁶ Aversion to sexual relations, decreased sexual desire, difficulty achieving erection, difficulty maintaining erection, premature ejaculation, ejaculation without erection, difficulty ejaculating, anorgasmia, coital pain, dissatisfaction with frequency of sexual relations, dissatisfaction with quality of sexual relations, dissatisfaction with own sexual function.

¹⁷ Maiorino M. I., Bellastella G., Esposito K. (2015).

Impact on women

There has been little research on the relationship between drinking and sexual function in women. Among the handful of studies, there was one done in Finland to evaluate an instrument that measures various aspects of sexual function in women: sexual desire, arousal, lubrication, orgasm, satisfaction, pain and overall function. According to this study, which was based on self-reported data, drinking alcohol is positively associated with all aspects of sexual function in general, except for satisfaction, which appears to be unrelated to alcohol consumption. However, the study also showed that things shifted when women drank during sexual relations: women under the influence of alcohol are more likely to report a problem with one of the aspects listed above than women who have no alcohol in their bodies.¹⁸

As observed among men, moderate drinking can have a positive impact on sexual function in women. One Italian study concluded that, compared to women who do not drink at all or those who have more than two drinks a day, women who drink red wine in moderation, i.e. one or two glasses a day, showed better results in terms of sexual desire, vaginal lubrication and overall sexual function. But regardless of their alcohol intake, there was no distinction among women with

regard to other aspects of sexual function, such as arousal, satisfaction, pain or orgasm.¹⁹ While this seems to suggest that a moderate amount of red wine could benefit women's sexuality, it is important to remember the limitations of the study—a small sample size and self-report questionnaires—and interpret the data with caution.

Another Italian study showed that drinking had no physiological effect on women's genital blood vessels or on vaginal lubrication, but alcohol was significantly associated with a larger number of sexual relations per week, as well as a higher incidence of orgasm among women who had between 11 and 20 drinks a month, compared to non-drinkers and women who had 10 drinks or fewer per month.²⁰ According to the study's authors, these results can be explained by the disinhibiting effect of alcohol.

What we glean from the research is that, for both men and women, there is a positive connection between moderate drinking—one or two drinks a day—and sexual function, and a negative connection between excessive drinking and sexual function.



¹⁸ Witting K. et al. (2008).

¹⁹ Mondaini N. et al. (2009).

²⁰ Battaglia C. et al. (2011).



Drinking and risky sexual behaviour

Risky sexual behaviour includes a variety of practices that can be harmful to a person's health. Topping the list is unprotected sex, which can lead to a sexually-transmitted disease or unplanned pregnancy. Unfortunately, drinking alcohol is known to increase the incidence of both.

Intention to use condoms and actual condom use

Drinking appears to be an aggravating factor in certain risky sexual behaviours, particularly having unprotected sex. A meta-analysis of 30 studies in the United States, Canada and the United Kingdom from 1996 to 2015 revealed that, compared to subjects who had received a placebo or no alcohol at all, those who were under the influence of alcohol reported a significantly higher intention to have unprotected sex.²¹ In 2016, another study indicated that young men are more likely to resist using a condom when they have been drinking; under the influence of alcohol, they believe it is acceptable to not want to use a condom, and that such behaviour is fairly normal.²²

In fact, these intentions result in risky sexual behaviour. In Great Britain, a study of young people aged 16 to 24 showed that those who frequently drank to excess were more likely to report that, during the previous year, they had had their first unprotected sex with at least one new partner, or unprotected sex with someone they had just met, or had used emergency contraception, such as the morning-after pill; they were also more likely to report having been diagnosed with a sexually transmitted disease in the previous five years.²³

The same results were seen among university students. While the connection between drinking and risky sexual behaviour varies according on the circumstances in which the drinking occurs—i.e. whether it takes place in a university residence, at a bar, or at a party on or off campus—generally speaking, the number of sexual partners, the prevalence of unplanned sex and the prevalence of unprotected sex increases with drinking frequency and amount of alcohol consumed per occasion.²⁴ In a recent study of young women in their early twenties, 67% said they had not used a condom²⁵ the last time they had sex when they were moderately drunk.

These results confirm the findings of many other studies, which show that condom use is less of a certainty when sex takes place under the influence of alcohol^{26, 27} or a combination of alcohol and drugs.^{28, 29, 30} Such results are explained by the fact that the disinhibiting effects of alcohol may contribute to the increase in risky sexual behaviour.

Other studies, however, propose that the amount of alcohol consumed increases the probability of having sex, but not necessarily unprotected sex.^{31, 32} Some researchers have observed that drinking alcohol had no direct effect on condom use, but it was an important risk factor for those who were not in the habit of using contraception.³³ Under the influence of alcohol, people tend to have more difficulty making enlightened decisions and therefore fall back on their usual contraceptive methods. Thus, the likelihood of having unprotected sex is determined more by a person's profile as a condom user—reliable or not reliable—than his or her profile as a drinker.

The results of a longitudinal study of female university students give rise to a theory of deviance, according to which “individuals who display a form of deviant behaviour are also more likely to engage in a number of other problem behaviours.”³⁴ In this study, the students who drank to excess used condoms less and less over the course of their first year in university.³⁵



²¹ Scott-Sheldon L.A.J. et al. (2016).

²² Davis K.C. et al. (2016).

²³ Khadr S.N. et al. (2016).

²⁴ Mair C., Ponicki W.R., Gruenewald P.J. (2016).

²⁵ Brown J.L., Talley A.E., Littlefield A.K., Gause N.K. (2016).

²⁶ Delaquis S.R., Gueye N.R., De Moissac D.L. (2015).

²⁷ Walsh J.L., Fielder R.L., Carey K.B., Carey M.P. (2014).

²⁸ Ssewanyana D. et al. (2015).

²⁹ Parks K.A., Collins R.L., Derrick J.L. (2012).

³⁰ Metrik J. et al. (2016).

³¹ Wells B.E. et al. (2015).

³² Metrik J. et al. (2016).

³³ Fennell J. (2013).

³⁴ Gervais J. (2014).

³⁵ Walsh J.L., Fielder R.L., Carey K.B., Carey M.P. (2013).

Alcohol and sexual violence

A number of studies have demonstrated a connection between alcohol and sexual violence.^{36,37} Also, based on the research of the last 30 years, we can conclude that, among the general population, excessive drinking is a cause of the incidence and severity of domestic violence.³⁸ Even though excessive drinking is neither a necessary nor sufficient cause of sexual violence, studies show that drinking—by both assailant and victim—contributes significantly to it.



³⁶ Mthembu J.C., Khan G., Mabaso M.L.H., Simbayi L.C. (2016).

³⁷ Radcliffe P. et al. (2016).

³⁸ Leonard K. E., Quigley B. M. (2016).

Alcohol and the assailant

In 2015, Dutch researchers completed a systematic review of the literature on the connection between substance use and domestic violence. Nearly 70 of the studies reviewed dealt specifically with the link between alcohol and domestic violence, including sexual violence, and even the use of force to obtain or try to obtain non-consensual sex. Despite significant differences in the way drinking was measured in each of these studies, the authors concluded that the risk of violence increased in tandem with alcohol consumption, and this applied to acts of violence committed by men and by women.

These results are similar to those of a meta-analysis of 22 studies designed to measure the effect of drinking on observed or self-reported indicators of assault in general, sexual assault and acts of domestic violence committed by men against women. Generally speaking, men under the influence of alcohol tend to act more aggressively towards women, compared to when they have not drunk any alcohol. Specifically, drinking alcohol increases the risk of sexual assault and domestic violence, no matter what moderating variables are taken into account.³⁹ The conclusions support the proximate cause theory, according to which the fact that the person is under the influence of alcohol contributes to an increase in violent behaviour in intimate relationships.⁴⁰

It is important to note that the connection between drinking and sexual assault varies according to certain characteristics of the assailants. One study among university students showed that the link between excessive drinking and violence in intimate relationships was no longer significant when antisocial behaviour and personality traits were taken into account.⁴¹ One author pointed out that, while proximate cause theory explains, in large part, the connection between drinking and violence, in the context of intimate relationships, common cause theory—or the deviance theory cited above—is also part of the answer.⁴² Violence and excessive drinking are related because they share common causes, such as genetic or temperament traits or other problems found in the antisocial personality.

³⁹ Crane C.A. et al. (2015).

⁴⁰ Rothman E. F., Reyes L. M., Johnson R. M., LaValley M. (2012).

⁴¹ Hines D. A., Straus M. A. (2007).

⁴² Gervais J. (2014).



The connection between drinking and sexual violence can also be indirect. Some studies have found that drinkers are more likely to answer that they would be sexually aggressive if they believed, a priori, that alcohol can increase sexual desire and feelings of aggression.⁴³ In 2015, researchers reviewed a number of studies in which alcohol was administered to participants, and various means, such as video clips, audio and video recordings and female accomplices, were used to evaluate men's propensity to commit sexual assault against women, in various hypothetical scenarios.⁴⁴ These studies showed that, among men, drinking is associated with sexual assault depending on their perception of their own sexual arousal, which they believe to be heightened under the influence; depending on their perception of the woman's state of arousal, which they overestimate or exaggerate; depending on their right to have sex, which they believe to be legitimate; or depending on how acceptable they find forced sex, which usually becomes more acceptable under the influence. For the authors, it is clear that the effects of alcohol on men's self-reported propensity to use force to obtain sex are essentially indirect, because of the impact of those effects on thoughts and emotions.

⁴³ Abbey A., Wegner R. (2015).

⁴⁴ Abbey A., Wegner R. (2015).

Alcohol and the victim

It is generally recognized that there is a connection between drinking alcohol and becoming vulnerable to sexual violence, although the nature and direction of the connection are not clear. One study of American women showed that the connection went both ways.⁴⁵ Sexual victimization predicts greater alcohol consumption after the assault than before. "Self-medication" is the term used, and it describes the phenomenon in which a person, usually a woman, drinks excessively in order to dull her pain. In cases of sexual assault by unknown or occasional partners, many studies have shown that drinking increases the likelihood of becoming a victim, particularly among women. This is a very delicate issue, since many people believe that establishing such a link is equivalent to blaming the victim. Let us be clear: consensual sex means the parties have consented to having sex, either through words or actions. The absence of resistance, as is sometimes seen when people are drunk, in no way equals consent.

What is consent?

1. Consent is an agreement between participants to engage in sexual activity.
2. Consent can be given by words or physical cues and must be given freely. The absence of resistance does not equal consent.
3. There cannot be consent if the person is unable to communicate it—for example, if the person has a physical or intellectual disability, or is drunk—or if one of the participants is in a position of authority, or uses threats, force or fraud to obtain sex.
4. Consent is not valid if it is given by a person who is under the age of 16 or is in a position of dependence.
5. A person who has consented to sexual activity can change their mind and withdraw consent through clear communication using words or actions.
6. Simply stating that you thought the other person had given their consent does not constitute sufficient evidence for a consent defence.

Source: www.calacs-granby.qc.ca/pdf_temp/112015/cahier_express_automne_2015.pdf

⁴⁵ Bryan A.E.B. et al. (2016).

Researchers in the U.S. have examined the scientific literature in order to better understand the link between drinking and vulnerability to sexual assault, and have concluded that there were two distinct mechanisms at work.⁴⁶

First of all, excessive drinking leads to a kind of “myopia,” which reduces the victim’s ability to recognize danger signals and situations with the potential for sexual assault. Experiments have shown that, even with a blood alcohol content (BAC) as low as 0.08, women are more likely to behave sexually, they are less able to perceive a situation as sexually risky, and they are less likely to express their intention to resist sexual advances. However, while all this is well documented, it explains only some instances of sexual violence.

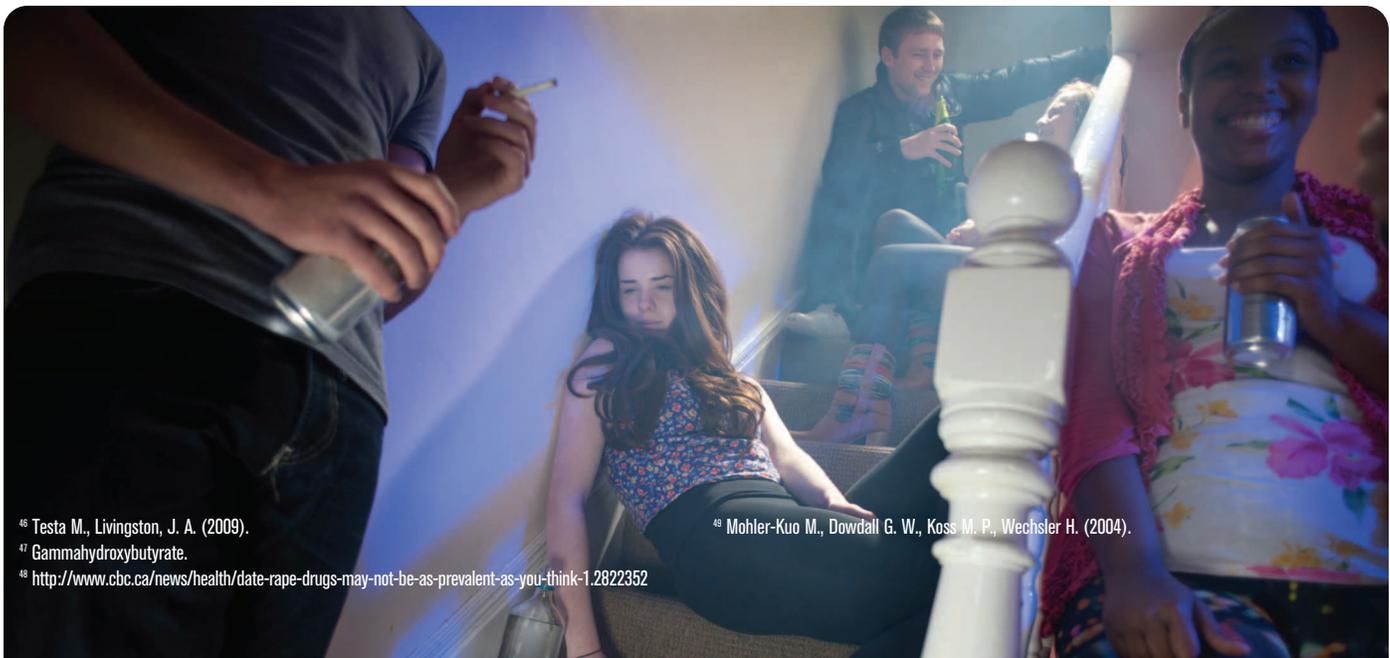
The second mechanism is more direct and occurs when a person is so drunk that they are incapable of objecting to or resisting sexual activity. Sometimes, getting the victim very drunk is actually a tactic used by the assailant in order to have sex. You might recall news stories about GHB⁴⁷— the so-called date rape drug — which an assailant would put in a victim’s drink prior to raping her. While such things do happen, they are rare occurrences.⁴⁸ Far less rare, especially among student populations, are cases of “absence of consent” rape, where

Rape at Stanford

A big news story of 2016 concerned a young woman who had been sexually assaulted while she was unconscious, during a party at Stanford University. At the trial, the assailant said he had found himself on the ground with the young woman, because she had fallen down. As part of a statement read to the court, the victim said this: “If a girl falls down, help her get back up. If she is too drunk to even walk and falls down, do not mount her, hump her, take off her underwear, and insert your hand inside her vagina. If a girl falls down, help her up.”

Source: www.buzzfeed.com/katiejmbaker/heres-the-powerful-letter-the-stanford-victim-read-to-her

the woman has consumed alcohol voluntarily but is too drunk to be able to consent to sex. While it is difficult to establish precisely how prevalent these absence-of-consent rapes are, researchers generally believe that the likelihood of rape after involuntary intoxication is considerably lower than absence-of-consent rape. Nearly three quarters (72%) of rapes on American college campuses are absence-of-consent rape.⁴⁹ Thus, it would appear that the real “date rape drug” is alcohol.



⁴⁶ Testa M., Livingston, J. A. (2009).

⁴⁷ Gammahydroxybutyrate.

⁴⁸ <http://www.cbc.ca/news/health/date-rape-drugs-may-not-be-as-prevalent-as-you-think-1.2822352>

⁴⁹ Mohler-Kuo M., Dowdall G. W., Koss M. P., Wechsler H. (2004).



The matter of context

It is important to note that the association between drinking and sexual violence also depends on social and cultural norms and expectations; we cannot ignore the significant influence of the environment on drinking.⁵⁰ One study carried out in a number of American universities brought to light the fact that the institutions with the most permissive policies regarding alcohol possession were the ones reporting the greatest number of sexual assaults.⁵¹ Thus, environmental factors regarding the availability of alcohol can be added to the individual factors associated with sexual violence.

Although it is illegal to do so, many bars and clubs in Quebec regularly offer women drinks at significant discounts, sometimes even for free. Some bars very popular among Cegep and university students have a regular “Ladies Night,” where women can drink as much as they like at no charge. Such practices are unethical, dangerous and illegal, and have been denounced in a number of annual reports from the Ethics Council of the Alcoholic Beverage Industry in Quebec.⁵²

Since we know that many cases of sexual assault on women are the result of voluntary, excessive drinking, it is unacceptable that such commercial practices—which are tantamount to complicity in rape—exist in Quebec.

The matter of quantity

When it comes to sexual violence, not drinking excessively is an important preventive step for everyone. Drinking moderately can help potential victims recognize red flags and danger signals. This may seem like an inequitable recommendation, since it is asking potential victims to modify their behaviour. However, as some researchers suggest, it is difficult to defend the argument that warning victims, particularly women, about drinking to the point of extreme intoxication is a loss for them or limits their freedom.⁵³

Note that the recommendation to drink moderately is not intended solely for potential victims, but for all who drink alcohol, in order to limit all the harmful consequences of excessive drinking. Drinking less is all the more important as a preventive measure, since it should also keep potential assailants from becoming disinhibited and adopting attitudes and behaviours that could lead to sexual assault.

⁵⁰ Graham K., Wilson I., Taft A. (2016).

⁵¹ Stotzer R.L., MacCartney D. (2016).

⁵² www.conseiltheique.qc.ca/fr/index.php

⁵³ Testa M., Livingston J. A. (2009).



Conclusion

Most people look forward to intimate relationships, having sex and experiencing pleasure. For some, alcohol seems to be one way to get there. Because of its disinhibiting effects, alcohol can, indeed, facilitate or help launch new relationships. Unfortunately, drinking more than moderately often leads to risky sexual behaviour. In the most serious instances, excessive drinking is associated with sexual violence and assault.

While some studies have shown that drinking a small amount of alcohol can promote intimacy and sexual relations in a number of ways, not a single study has shown that drinking a great deal of alcohol can be in any way beneficial.

Therefore, when it comes to love and sex, once again, moderation is always in good taste.

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Moderation is always in good taste.

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