MAKING CHOICES
Your decision to drink alcohol – whether to drink, how much, how often, where, and why – can affect your health, personal goals, and relationships. Many people don’t drink, and that’s perfectly normal. Most people who drink do so in moderation. The trick is balancing the good with the not-so-good things about alcohol.

Knowledge is power. Begin with the facts about alcohol and an honest assessment of your drinking habits. Check out the Wellness Resource Center’s anonymous online “Alcohol and Drug Self-Assessment” at www.thewell.vcu.edu for a free objective analysis of your alcohol use.

HOW MUCH IS “TOO MUCH”?
❖ Drinking becomes too much when it increases the risk for alcohol-related problems and alcohol use disorders.
❖ Studies show that you are at increased risk for alcohol-related problems if you:
  • Are male and have 5 or more standard drinks in a day (or more than 14 per week).
  • Are female and have 4 or more drinks in a day (or more than 7 per week).
❖ Drinking too much even once can lead to negative consequences. Common scenarios include physically injuring yourself or someone else, getting a sexually transmitted infection, flunking your classes, etc.
❖ Over time, too much drinking causes progressive damage to your body and brain, which can lead to liver and heart disease, circulatory problems, bleeding from the digestive tract, certain cancers, irreversible brain damage, and death.

WHAT’S A STANDARD DRINK?
A standard drink contains about 14 grams of pure alcohol and is equal to approximately:

- 12 oz of beer
- 10 oz of microbrew
- 10 oz of a wine cooler
- 8 oz of malt liquor
- 4.5 oz of an alcoholic energy drink
- 4-5 oz of table wine
- 3-4 oz of fortified wine (such as sherry or port)
- 1.5 oz of 80 proof hard liquor*
- 1 oz of 100 proof hard liquor*

*Depending on the type of drink, a mixed drink can contain 1:3 or more standard drinks.

HOW DOES ALCOHOL AFFECT MY BODY?
Alcohol changes your behavior and judgment from the very first drink.

❖ Alcohol is absorbed into the bloodstream from the small intestine, where it travels quickly to the brain and all the other organs of the body.
❖ Your liver can only process about one standard alcoholic drink an hour. If you drink faster than this, alcohol will build up in your bloodstream until your liver gets rid of it.
❖ The higher your blood alcohol concentration (BAC), the more intoxicated you become. The number of drinks it takes to bump up the BAC varies from person to person:
  • The less you weigh, the more quickly you will feel the effects of alcohol.
  • If you are female, you will feel the effects of alcohol faster than a male counterpart, even if you weigh the same and have a similar number of drinks. This is because women have less body fluid, more body fat, and fewer enzymes that process alcohol.
  • Read on to learn about other factors that can affect your BAC.

YOUR BODY KNOWS WHAT’S NORMAL AND WHAT’S NOT
It is not normal to drink and:

❖ Vomit or pass out, injure yourself, or have blackouts. These are all signs that you’ve had too much alcohol.
❖ Wake up with a hangover. This is a sign that your body is reacting to a toxic substance. Your liver burns off alcohol slowly at a set pace. You can’t speed up this process with coffee, cold showers, exercise, vomiting, or any other remedy you may have heard of.

STRATEGIES FOR DRINKING SMART
It’s tough to make decisions about alcohol if your judgment is impaired. Stay in control by making decisions about drinking ahead of time. Here are some tips that will help you “drink smart”:

■ Set limits. Decide how many drinks you’ll have at a time and how many days a week you want to drink. It’s a good idea to have days when you don’t drink.
■ Keep track of how much you drink. Use whatever works for you: a 3x5 card in your wallet, check marks on a calendar, or a smartphone app. Doing this before each drink will help you know when to slow down.
■ Pace and space. Four drinks over four hours doesn’t mean three in the first 30 minutes and one in the last 30 minutes. Pace yourself and sip slowly. Choose to have no more than one alcoholic drink an hour. Alternate non-alcoholic drinks with alcoholic ones.
■ Include food. Eating before or while you drink will slow down your body’s absorption of alcohol.
■ Limit carbonated mixers or sparkling wines. These types of drinks will increase alcohol absorption by your body. Diluting alcohol with water or juice will slow down its absorption.
■ Know when to say “no”. If you are offered a drink when you don’t want one, have a polite convincing “no thanks” ready and maintain eye contact. Everyone has the right to abstain from drinking, and that right should be respected.
To keep yourself out of harm’s way when you drink, consider the following common-sense advice:

Avoid…

- **Drinks containing unknown amounts of alcohol**, like “Jungle Juice” or any drink you didn’t see mixed.
- **Drinking games**. The purpose is to get you drunk fast, and you can easily exceed your limit before you know it.
- **Mixing alcohol with other drugs**. Combining alcohol with drugs (over-the-counter, prescription, or illicit) is the most common cause of drug-related deaths in the US. Even mixing over-the-counter medications like Tylenol with alcohol can be harmful. If you are taking any medications, talk to your healthcare provider first to avoid dangerous side effects.
- **Mixing alcohol with sex**. Alcohol may decrease your inhibitions, but it also decreases your ability to function sexually and to make safe decisions. Mixing alcohol with sex increases your risks of pregnancy and getting an STD. Alcohol can also set the stage for date rape.
- **Drinking if you’re upset**. Alcohol has a way of exaggerating your emotional state. If you’re sad or angry when you start drinking, alcohol often intensifies these feelings.
- **Drinking and driving**. Even if you are just a little intoxicated, forget driving! You may feel great, but your reflexes and judgment are impaired. VCU students look out for each other and use designated drivers or share taxis to get home safely.

**ANALYZE YOUR DRINKING HABITS**

Complete VCU’s online “Alcohol and Drug Self-Assessment” at www.thewell.vcu.edu to get objective feedback about your drinking. Then compare yourself to the charts below. You don’t have to have every symptom to fit into a category.

**Social drinkers**

- Drink slowly, and know when to stop drinking.
- Eat before or while drinking.
- Never drive after drinking.
- Respect non-drinkers.
- Obey drinking laws.

**Problem drinkers**

- Drink to get drunk.
- Try to solve problems by drinking.
- Drink when they shouldn’t, such as before driving or going to class or work.
- Need to drink before parties or dates.
- Experience changes in personality and may become loud, angry, or violent OR become silent, remote, or reclusive.
- Cause other problems and harm themselves, family, friends, and/or strangers.

**Alcoholics**

- Spend a lot of time thinking about drinking and planning when and where to get the next drink.
- Keep bottles hidden for quick pick-me-ups.
- Start drinking without planning and lose awareness of the amount they consume.
- Deny drinking.
- Drink alone.
- Need to drink before stressful situations.
- May have “blackouts” when they can’t remember what they did while drinking, though they may appear normal to others at the time.
- Go from having hangovers to more dangerous withdrawal symptoms, which can be fatal.
- Have major problems with the police, an employer, friends, and/or family.

**MAKING A CHANGE**

If you’ve taken an honest look at your alcohol use and have any concerns:

- **First**, decide if you want to make a change. Ask yourself how you feel about your drinking habits. What do you like and not like about drinking? What are your goals? What changes would work for you? Who would support you?
- **Seek out** someone you trust to discuss your concerns and brainstorm about how to get back on track.
- **Don’t be afraid** to ask for help. The staffs at University Student Health Services, The Wellness Resource Center, and University Counseling Services are here to offer assistance in a non-judgmental way. Our goal is to help you help yourself.

- **Pathways to Choices** is a two-part alcohol and drug education class for VCU students offered through University Counseling Services. Visit www.thewell.vcu.edu/pathways-to-choices for more information.

- **Go to** www.thewell.vcu.edu/alcoholdrugs for info about local support groups:
  - VCU’s **Rams in Recovery** student group meets at the Wellness Resource Center every Friday at 2pm. To get connected, call 828-2086 or email recovery@vcu.edu.
  - Consider going to an **Alcoholics Anonymous (AA)** meeting. Some are right on campus. Meet others who have been in your shoes, and learn about positive changes you can make.
  - If AA is not your thing, check out a **Smart Recovery (Self-Management and Recovery Training)** meeting on campus. This support group focuses on self-empowerment and science-based tools to overcome addiction issues. Learn more at www.smartrecovery.org.

- Other support groups and resources include www.moderation.org and www.sobersources.com.

- **Don’t stop drinking suddenly if you are dependent on alcohol!** A sudden withdrawal from heavy drinking can be dangerous and even fatal. Consult your healthcare provider to plan a safe recovery.

**CONTACT US**

**UNIVERSITY STUDENT HEALTH SERVICES**

- **MCV Campus** 1000 E. Marshall St., 3rd Floor (804) 828-9220

**UNIVERSITY COUNSELING SERVICES**

- **Monroe Park Campus** Student Commons, Room 238 907 Floyd Ave. (804) 828-6200
- **MCV Campus** 1000 E. Marshall St, 4th Floor (804) 828-3964

**WELLNESS RESOURCE CENTER**
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