

# alcohol

■ **Overview:** Whether most people know it or not, ethyl alcohol (or ethanol) is a real drug, one that causes more deaths, crime, and health and behavioral problems than all illegal drugs combined. Produced by the fermentation and distillation of grain, fruit, and other plant products,



alcohol is used throughout the world, except in Islamic countries, which oppose its use.

■ **Actions/Effects:** Ethanol is a central nervous system depressant that triggers a range of physical, emotional, and behavioral changes. The rate at which it enters the bloodstream (and exerts its psychoactive effects) is influenced by various factors, including gender and body size and whether drinking is done on a full or empty stomach. As blood-alcohol levels rise, effects increase. At low doses, effects includes a loosening of inhibitions along with feelings of relaxation and well-being. At higher doses, intoxication is linked to progressive levels of impairment.

■ **Duration:** Depends on the amount consumed. Since the liver can only metabolize about one drink per hour, drinking more than that causes intoxication and impairment.



■ **Medical Uses:** Alcohol has a long history of medical uses, but is no longer used as a medicine in its own right. When used at all today, it's combined with other ingredients in cough syrups or elixirs.

■ **Risks/Side Effects:** All body systems are affected by alcohol. Side effects include dilation of blood vessels (which causes flushed skin) and increased gastric secretion in the stomach. At high doses, side effects include mood swings, unrestrained behavior, and inability to control motor functions as basic as walking.



Other effects include blackouts, sleep problems (including impaired REM sleep), and hangovers. Side effects increase in severity with chronic abuse. Heavy drinkers suffer a variety of alcohol-related problems, including damage to the brain, stomach, pancreas, heart, and liver.

■ **Trends:** After continual increases in consumption since the 1930's, use among adults began to level off in the 1980's and even declined during the first half of the 1990's.

■ **Demographics:** All socioeconomic and ethnic groups in society are affected, but overuse is most common among younger people. According to a recent survey, more than 15.9 million Americans are considered "heavy" drinkers, while 30 percent of the high school class of 2006 reported being drunk at least once during the month preceding an annual survey.



This is one in a series of fact sheets on drugs and health published by Do It Now Foundation. Please call for a complete list of titles—or visit our web site at [www.doitnow.org](http://www.doitnow.org).



**Do It Now Foundation**

Box 27568 ■ Tempe, AZ 85285-7568 ■ 480.736.0599