

## How can smoking and drinking affect your sex life?

You all know that it is bad for your health to smoke or to drink too much. However, apart from the warning on some cigarette packs that “tobacco use can make you impotent”, you may not have heard much about the effect that smoking and drinking can have on your sex life. While the media and advertising often attach a sexy image to drinking in particular, the scientific evidence indicates a number of effects of smoking and drinking on sexual functioning that may be of interest. This article is not a lecture about why you shouldn’t smoke or drink too much. Rather, our goal is simply to point out some things you should know about smoking, drinking and sex. So if a healthy sex life is important to you, let’s check the research.

### How can smoking affect sexual response?

Based on findings for 2005 from the Canadian Community Health Survey, 26% of women and 33% of men aged 18-34 were current smokers; among youth of both sexes aged 12-17, the figure was 8%. These values declined from previous years but still indicate that a sizeable percentage of teens and young adults are current smokers ([www.statcan.gc.ca/daily-quotidien/060613/dq060613a-eng.htm](http://www.statcan.gc.ca/daily-quotidien/060613/dq060613a-eng.htm)).

So, what immediate effects can smoking have on sexual response? To answer this question, we first need to understand that physical sexual arousal (e.g., erection of the penis in the male, swelling of the clitoris and genital engorgement in the female) involves increased blood flow to the genital area. Blood flows in faster than it flows out. Anything that alters the cardio-vascular system’s ability to pump blood to the genitals can slow down or reduce the intensity of this genital response. Cigarette smoking has been shown to have this effect by impeding the circulatory system’s delivery of oxygenated blood throughout the body. For example, several studies have reported that smoking cigarettes within a 24-hour period prior to sexual activity can reduce the hardness of a man’s erection during sleep and when awake. Other research has shown that nicotine can inhibit physical sexual arousal in men and women.

### Drinking Alcohol and Sexual Response

The idea that drinking makes you look sexy, get’s you “in the mood” and helps you to feel relaxed for sex is so common that some people believe that by getting drunk they are more likely to enjoy sex. Is this true? To clarify the impact of drinking on sexual function, we’ll look at three different categories: light drinking over time; getting drunk; heavy drinking over time.

There is no evidence that moderate alcohol consumption in the short- or long-term will have a negative impact on your sex life. Having a beer or a glass of wine is unlikely to increase blood alcohol levels enough to interfere with sexual response. However, it is clear that the physical ability to respond sexually decreases as the amount of alcohol a person consumes increases. While drinking alcohol may make some people feel more confident and out-going, it is important to understand that in terms of how it affects you physically alcohol is a nervous system depressant. In other words, alcohol slows down brain functioning, respiration, and circulation. It’s therefore not surprising that research has found that drinking large amounts of alcohol can reduce the ability of a man to get and keep an erection. Research has also found that large doses of alcohol can reduce a woman’s ability to become sexually aroused and have an orgasm.

Men and women who engage in long-term heavy or binge drinking can experience a wide range of sexual and reproductive health problems. These include erectile difficulties and low desire in men and arousal and orgasm problems, as well as painful sex, in women.



### What's the Take Home Message?

Choosing to smoke cigarettes or drink alcohol is a personal decision. Most of us know that smoking any amount of cigarettes or having more than a drink or two at one time is bad for our health. More specifically, though, it is eye-opening to look at the potential impact of smoking and drinking too much on sexual arousal because they are often associated with sex and sexuality in a positive way. It's ironic that while some people may see smoking as glamorous and sexy, cigarettes can directly interfere with the body's ability to respond sexually. And although some people like to get drunk because it makes them feel more relaxed and more open when it comes to sex, the fact is that getting drunk may well reduce the physical sensations a person feels or it may interfere with their becoming sexually aroused in the first place.

### Links

For a review of research on the impact of tobacco, alcohol, and drugs (Cocaine/crack, Methamphetamine, Marijuana) see McKay, A. (2005). Sexuality and substance use: the impact of tobacco, alcohol, and selected recreational drugs on sexual function. *The Canadian Journal of Human Sexuality*, 14, 47-56.

[http://www.sieccan.org/pdf/mckay\\_cjhs2005\\_sexualityandsubstanceuse.pdf](http://www.sieccan.org/pdf/mckay_cjhs2005_sexualityandsubstanceuse.pdf)

For more information on the impact of drinking on sexuality see Silverberg, C. (2006). Alcohol and sex: what are the sexual effects of alcohol. About.com.

[http://sexuality.about.com/od/sexualhealthqanda/a/alcohol\\_and\\_sex.htm](http://sexuality.about.com/od/sexualhealthqanda/a/alcohol_and_sex.htm)

