My Jolly Holidays Without Alcohol

December 17, 2018 By Lucinda K. Porter RN

I stopped drinking a long time ago. At first, it was because I had hepatitis C. However, after a well-meaning liver specialist told me it would be okay to drink occasionally, I discovered that I had an obsession for alcohol. I didn't drink a great deal, but I thought about it all the time. I knew that if I didn't have hepatitis C, the floodgates would open, and I would drink every chance I got. So, I decided to give it up, and I have been quite content without it.

The holidays are here and alcohol is everywhere. Television ads beckon us to forge friendships with sparkling drinks. Hot toddies are passed around at every outdoor event I attend. However, I am not in the least tempted because I know that if I were to start drinking, the obsession would kick in, and I would jeopardize my health.

Fortunately, science backs up my decision to abstain from alcohol. This year, The Lancet reported that the safest amount of alcohol to consume is none at all. It doesn't get any clearer than that. However, if you are like most people, you aren't going to let a little thing like medical science stop you from a bit of imbibing.

The trick is to stay within healthy limits. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommend that women limit their alcohol use to one drink a day; men should consume no more than two drinks a day. This means a glass of wine, a bottle of beer or a shot of spirits. Be sure to drink standard sizes.

An occasional drinker is likely to suffer fewer health consequences than a daily drinker is, assuming that you stick to the alcohol amounts recommended for your gender. Limiting drinking to weekends is not an excuse to binge drink, a dangerous practice that can harm the liver and other organs. Obviously, don't drink if you are taking certain medications, driving, or you are pregnant. Skip alcohol use if you are unable to control your drinking.

What if you are unable to drink within the recommended amounts or find yourself drinking when you know you shouldn't? You may have a problem. There are many self-tests available on the Internet. Click here for one published by Alcoholics Anonymous.

Here is another quick self-test called the CAGE questionnaire, consisting of just 4 questions:

- Have you ever felt you should Cut down on your drinking?
- Have people Annoyed you by criticizing your drinking?

- Have you ever felt bad or Guilty about your drinking?
- Have you ever taken a morning Eye-opener (a drink first thing in the morning)?

One “yes” answer suggests a possible alcohol problem. More than one “yes” answer means it is highly likely that a problem exists. If you think that you or someone you know might have an alcohol problem, it is important to see a doctor or other health care provider right away. They can help you determine if a drinking problem exists and plan the best course of action.

If you are unable to quit drinking, you may need help. Alcoholism is a disease, not a character flaw. There are many resources to assist those with alcohol problems, including professional, non-professional, self-help, spiritual, and secular-based approaches. If one method does not work, try another until you find one that works for you.

Whether or not drinking is a problem for you, the holidays are filled with temptations. It may be helpful to develop strategies for coping with these temptations. If you have found it difficult to get through a social event without imbibing, devise an alcohol-free plan. Identify the triggers that cause you to drink. If talking to people is difficult, try visualizing yourself at ease in social contexts. Collect an array of conversation-starters that might be of general interest, such as:

- “Have you seen any good movies lately?”
- “Will the 49ers ever have a good team again?”
- “What is your favorite book of all time?”
- “Are you doing anything special for the holidays?
- “Do you have anything special planned in the near future?”

As for what to drink at parties, you don’t have to stick to water. Here are some suggestions:

- Tonic with a twist of lemon or lime
- Shirley Temple or Roy Rogers with at least 2 maraschino cherries
- Tomato juice with a dash of Tabasco and a slice of lemon (avoid if on sodium restriction)
- Club soda or seltzer on the rocks with an olive
- Cola with lemon or lime
- Hot chocolate topped with whipped cream
- Hot apple cider with a cinnamon stick
- Carbonated water with grenadine and a wedge of lemon, lime, or orange
- A “virgin” version of any favorite mixed drink, such as a non-alcoholic piña colada

- A non-alcoholic beer with lemon (Caution: non-alcoholic beers and wines are usually prohibited for those in addiction recovery or organ transplant programs)
- Drink from nice glassware. Sparkling water from a wine glass adds a touch of elegance.

May your holiday season be festive, healthy, and alcohol-free followed by a happy New Year.

Resources

Alcoholic Anonymous (AA)

American Council on Alcoholism HelpLine 800.527.5344

National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA)

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