

the RED CUP Q&A

separating alcohol fact from fiction

wildfact

85% of UA students did not experience memory loss as a result of drinking in the past 30 days.
(2016 Health & Wellness Survey, n=3,113)

Why does alcohol make you blackout yet still look like you're functioning?

Great question! First let's define blacking out as some people confuse it with passing out. They are two different things. A blackout can occur when someone engages in heavy drinking, usually in a short period of time and then has an amnesia-like period until their BAC (blood alcohol concentration) decreases. Blackouts are generally divided into two categories. En bloc blackouts are stretches of time for which the person has no memory whatsoever. Fragmentary blackouts are episodes for which the drinker's memory is spotty, with bits of memory providing some insight into the drinking episode. This can be a scary, embarrassing thing for a drinker to realize the next day, wondering what happened. How did I get home and what's this giant bruise on my leg?

What happens in your brain is that memory receptors get blocked with

excessive alcohol intake. You're not forgetting what happened; you're actually not forming the memory. And you don't realize it until you sober up, usually the next morning. Your friends don't realize you're blacked out either because you appear to be intoxicated, but functioning in that you still remember your friend's names and where you live, etc. It's just that you aren't in control of what you are doing or able to give consent to things you wouldn't do if sober. You just won't know what you did during this period of excessive BAC. High tolerance can be a factor here also, leading your friends to believe you're ok.

What can you do to avoid blackouts? The good news is that they are preventable by reducing the amount of alcohol you consume, spacing your drinks further apart, drinking them more slowly, and eating before going out.

Got a question about alcohol? Email it to redcup@email.arizona.edu



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