

FACTORS THAT CONTRIBUTE TO
Blood Alcohol Content



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Blood alcohol content (BAC) is a measure of the amount of alcohol that is present in one's bloodstream. BAC is used to determine whether someone is legally intoxicated. In the United States, the legal definition of intoxication is someone with a BAC of 0.08% or higher. If one is caught driving with a BAC of 0.08% or higher, then they are legally intoxicated and face the charges of driving while intoxicated (DWI) or driving under the influence (DUI). To avoid driving while intoxicated, many try to track their BAC by counting drinks (there is a myth that one can remain under the legal limit if they only consume one drink per hour), but there are other contributing factors to BAC that aren't accounted for if one is merely counting drinks. Here are some other factors that affect BAC.



Age

The intoxicating effects of alcohol become increasingly pronounced as one ages. This means that if someone could drink three drinks in three hours when they were 25 years old and have a BAC under 0.08%, that at 40 years old, those three drinks in three hours could very well put them over the legal limit.



Drink Strength

The standard drink is 12 oz. of beer, 5 oz. of wine, or 1.5 oz. of distilled spirits. When people are counting their drinks, this is the standard that is used in estimating BAC, but there is a lot of variation in the alcohol content of these beverages. The average beer is 5% alcohol by volume, but a beer can be anywhere from 4% alcohol to 18%. An 18% alcohol beer is going to result in one getting intoxicated faster than a typical 5% alcohol beer. Wine can also fluctuate drastically in alcohol content, but the serving sizes are usually what complicates counting drinks. Many establishments use large wine glasses and pour more than 5 oz. into each glass. The average consumer might not realize that they're getting a larger serving and count their drinks as if each one was only one serving. The most dangerous variation comes in the form of mixed drinks. The amount of alcohol in a typical mixed drink varies from establishment to establishment, and a strong mixed drink can be 4-5 times stronger than a mixed drink is supposed to be. Drink strength is one of the biggest contributing factors to BAC that makes counting drinks an unreliable way to monitor one's level of intoxication.



Medications

Many medications have adverse effects when paired with alcohol. Some medications will increase the intoxicating effects of alcohol, while others can have truly dangerous consequences including respiratory failure, coma, and death. Before drinking while taking any medication, one should check all labels for alcohol warnings, or consult a doctor or pharmacist.



Alcohol Intolerance

Some people are born with a genetic condition that does not allow their body to break down alcohol. The symptoms of the condition include flushness of the skin, nasal congestion, elevated heart rate, and reduced blood pressure. Having an intolerance to alcohol causes one's body to absorb alcohol differently than those who don't, making counting drinks completely unreliable for them.



Food

When one drinks on an empty stomach, it allows the alcohol to absorb into the body faster. This is because when the body is busy digesting food, it holds the alcohol in the stomach longer before it passes to the intestines where it absorbs into the bloodstream. This effect is reduced when drinking carbonated drinks, which increases pressure within the stomach and forces the absorption of alcohol into the bloodstream through the stomach lining.



Gender

Alcohol is water soluble. Men generally have higher water content in their bodies, meaning that they need to consume more alcohol than their female counterparts of the same age and weight to reach the same BAC. Women also have a lower amount of the enzyme in the stomach that breaks down alcohol than men.



Body Type

The more a person weighs, the more water they have in their body. Since alcohol is water soluble, larger people must drink more than their smaller counterparts to reach the same BAC. Fat and muscle content are also a factor in how one's body absorbs alcohol. Fat tissue is only 10% water, whereas muscle tissue is 75% water. This means that a person with high fat content will generally have a higher BAC than a muscular person of the same weight and age.

The only reliable way to calculate one's own BAC is to use a portable breathalyzer, like the ones the police use. That said, if you are drinking away from your own home, you should arrange a designated driver to get you to and from your destination. Whether it's a friend who will refrain from drinking or a car service, a designated driver is the safest way to get around during a night of drinking.



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No matter how safe you are with your own actions, there's always a chance that others on the road will not be taking the same precautions. If you are injured in a car accident that was caused by a drunk driver, it is important that you contact a skilled personal injury attorney to discuss your legal options. For more information on what to do if you were the victim of a drunk driving accident, please contact The Pottenger Law Firm.

