

This FAQ chapter presents the views and experiences of men in relation to alcohol. We begin with quotes from men below, and continue to represent what we have been told in the pages that follow.

Most people my age/gender use alcohol to initiate sexual encounters. Is my experience typical of gay men my age?

(Online respondent)

I drink like a fish and don't care about the consequences, makes me sad when I'm hung-over.

(Online respondent)

I live alone, I wouldn't say lonely but you go out more. This means drinking alcohol, so the next day or two, I feel down, a bit anxious. So I'm trying not to drink so much. It's with circumstances, I can feel anxious. And with alcohol, it's the old cliché, seems like a good idea at the time and the next day you think 'Oh my god did I do that?'

(Gay, 26-35, HIV negative)

I was in a relationship with a man for a year. We broke up just about a year ago. He was drinking and would get violent... He had been violent before with me and with other people. Alcohol was the main trigger but he just wasn't right I don't think. It was only one or two times before this but not serious but it was getting worse and worse.

(Gay, 16-25, HIV negative)

How does alcohol consumption contribute to the spread of STIs in the LGBT community, if at all?

(Online respondent)

FAQ Scotland is part of a larger project that wants to prevent HIV infections in Scotland among gay and bisexual men. The larger project is called an HIV Needs Assessment, undertaken by NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde and NHS Lothian. For more about FAQ and other FAQ chapters go to

www.faqscotland.co.uk

OVERVIEW

What we learned from men about their experiences:

- Across their interactions with FAQ, men identify that alcohol plays a significant role in the social and sexual lives of gay and bisexual men.
- Men recognise that alcohol impairs decision making, sometimes explaining decisions they might not otherwise make; in some circumstances they report not remembering decisions made or risks taken.
- Men who drink alcohol while having sex report higher partner numbers.
- Even in the context of heavy alcohol use some men remain committed to condom use for anal sex.
- For some men there is sense of regret about decisions which have been influenced by alcohol, which impacts on their sense of mental wellbeing.
- Alcohol has also been identified by men as a factor in making decisions about condom use in a relationship. Rather than making a decision to stop condom use as a result of discussion, condoms might be dispensed with in the moment.
- Alcohol use is prevalent as a form of currency when men are paid for sex.
- Alcohol use also features in the experiences of violence men have reported.
- When men are asked if they *have ever discussed alcohol/their drinking with someone at a sexual health clinic* and *would they ever do so* few men report ever having such a discussion, but many more would do so.

What the findings mean for HIV prevention and HIV/Sexual Health clinical services

- Reflecting the fact that alcohol plays a significant role in the social and sexual lives of gay and bisexual men consideration of alcohol use must play a part in the assessment of HIV/STI risk and the development of individualised, person-centred approaches to improve outcomes for men.
- Individualised care should provide an opportunity to discuss and plan risk reduction strategies that are particular and appropriate to the individual's circumstances and their relationship with alcohol.
- Where men require more intensive alcohol dependency services, they should be supported to access these. Specialist alcohol services must have the confidence and skills to address the needs of gay and bisexual men who are referred to them.
- Reflecting on the needs of gay and bisexual men, consideration should be given to the potential of developing specific alcohol services for them as part of community sexual health improvement services.

Reflective questions for practitioners

Throughout FAQ reporting, we ask individual practitioners, teams and services to read the detail of findings and then take time to reflect on important questions. Some FAQ subjects touch on the experiences of professional staff. In terms of problematic alcohol use, it may be the case that staff across clinical services also need to reflect on how alcohol impacts their lives, and seek help when necessary. With this in mind we pose these reflective questions for practitioners:

- Have I considered the role that alcohol plays in the lives of men I work with?
- How do I approach a conversation with a man about his alcohol use?
- Should my service routinely ask men about alcohol use?
- Am I clear in my engagement with men that my service is more than a pragmatic 'test and treat' service, that I provide a holistic service which has a concern for all aspects of wellbeing?
- In the consulting room, do I make space for individuals to pause, reflect, and talk about alcohol use?
- If a man needs further information or specialist services regarding alcohol use, do I know where they can go and do I support them to get there?
- How might I/my service work across the LGBT community to encourage reflection and dialogue on the part alcohol plays in the community and in personal and sexual relationships?

For more about the FAQ approach and project participants go to the **About FAQ** chapter at: www.faqscotland.co.uk

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Throughout the chapter direct quotes from participating men are **in blue**. When direct quotes are taken from an FAQ telephone interview it is possible to identify sexual orientation, age group and HIV status (actual or perceived); an internal interview code is also given. Quotes taken from online responses are labelled as such.

INVOLVING PARTICIPANTS

Men responded to questions about alcohol use in FAQ telephone interviews and online.

In the first wave of FAQ interviews 118 men were asked about recent sexual experiences and in each example were asked if they drank alcohol as part of that experience. If the answer was yes, follow up questions of what they were drinking and how much, were asked. Some men volunteered further information about alcohol use. Of the 118 men engaged in the first round of FAQ telephone interviews 70 (59.3%) report alcohol use in at least one sexual contact discussed.

In the first phase of the online research, the FAQ **Diary Room**, men were asked: *Do you like to drink alcohol when you have sex?* 173 of the 421 (41%) respondents replied yes.

In the second phase of FAQ online via an **Alcohol** themed survey men were asked to comment on a number of areas:

- 63 men (of 72 respondents to the question: 87.5%) report that they will drink alcohol when having sex.
- 56 men (of 70 respondents: 80%) report drinking alcohol can affect the decisions they make about sex.
- 37 men (of 68 respondents: 54.4%) report not always remembering what they have done when they mixed sex and alcohol.
- 27 men (of 70 respondents: 38.6%) worry that they are drinking too much

Across their interactions with FAQ, men identify that alcohol plays a significant role in the social and sexual lives of gay and bisexual men. The findings reported in this chapter draw on the experiences and views shared.

FINDINGS

Alcohol use and risk taking behaviour

Men recognise that alcohol impairs decision making, sometimes excusing decisions they might not otherwise make; in some circumstances they report not remembering decisions made or risks taken.

Sex with friends usually happens if we've been drinking and one thing leads to another.

(Gay, 26-35, HIV negative, I1/022)

Had you been drinking alcohol? Yes, lots. A huge number of cocktails... I would say a good 7 to 8 cocktails and beer before that. A good 4 or 5 bottles of beer. I fucked him. I just felt that it was safe enough. In hindsight I kind of regretted it... Does the other man's status matter to you? It should do and it does now but it didn't at the time for some reason. Read alcohol into that maybe.

(Gay, 26-35, HIV negative, I1/103)

I've never had anyone who just gets in and cums in me. Sometimes they do but I ask them to pull out. One time a guy came inside me but I was intoxicated with alcohol and I did go to the Sandyford and got tested for AIDS.

(Bisexual, 36-45, HIV negative, I2/078)

We drunk a couple of bottles of wine, two, possibly three. We decided to have a shower together, and then I thought well we'll move into the bed room but in the shower we wound up having sex in the shower and before I knew it, I was fucking him in the shower. He didn't protest at all. It was not to put the blame on him, but he backed onto me, so I just went with it. I don't drink at all. But this time I did.

(Gay, 36-45, HIV negative, I1/071)

Because of his job, I know he would be tested so I know I can trust him on that side as well... I'm not going to have sex with somebody who's HIV positive. I don't want to put myself at risk. Sometimes I do have unprotected sex with other guys. I know that's when I usually have had a fair amount to drink and I'm horny. Normally because I'm very horny and being top and I prefer to fuck and the horn takes over.

(Gay, 26-35, HIV negative, I1/069)

(We were) in a club and then he invited me back to his flat and then we had sex. Would have been vodka probably. Probably about 10 or something. I fucked him. I said I would prefer to use them but obviously he didn't have any so. Yeah, it was me. It was okay. Pretty much went pretty quick.

(Gay, 16-25, HIV negative, I1/050)

Quite a lot to drink before. I had drunk some gin and tonics and then some beers... He was fucking me although I was pretty drunk and not totally aware of what was going on. There may have been a couple of guys who were involved but because it was late, I was saved by the bell. I broke it off early when I realised it was unprotected. I was not fully in my senses. I was involved with somebody who said I'm going to get a condom and I said that was cool. Then somebody else got involved and they penetrated me and I was aware that it was not the same guy and there had been no condoms. So I decided to get myself home.

(Gay, 45+, HIV positive, I2/044)

Yes. I can't remember how much but I know it was a lot. Cider, probably seven or eight. Did you use a condom? To be honest, I can't remember, that's why I was in the clinic to get checked the other day.

(Gay, 16-25, HIV negative, I1/011)

What did you have to drink and how many? Vodka and jaeger bombs. About a half litre of vodka between us before we went out and then probably about 10 drinks. 3 Jaeger bombs and the rest double vodkas. I fucked him. Did you use a condom? We did not, because I've no idea where they are in my bedroom. I've got about 6 drawers and I didn't know which one. And we were rather drunk.

(Gay, 26-35, HIV negative, I2/046)

Even in the context of heavy alcohol use some men remain committed to condom use for anal sex.

What weren't we drinking would be more like it. Things like WKD, vodka, quite a bit, enough to be drunk... I always use condoms. It was automatic. We didn't discuss, we just use them, like putting your seat belt on when you get in a car. It's common sense This is why I always use condoms. I always think to myself, I'm not with the person 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Because I'm not him I can't share all his experiences. The best people can be liars so I always protect myself.

(Gay, 36-45, HIV negative, I1/079)

We met in the sauna in the dark room. What did you have to drink and how many? Probably about quite a few with some mates and it was after we were all drunk that we decided to go to the sauna. Blue WKDs were on offer so we probably had a dozen... He fucked me. I think there were a few about 2 or 3 probably. Did you use a condom? Yeah, they all used them. One tried not to and I pushed them away. We didn't discuss but there is a kind of code that if they try it you can push them away. Even though I was drunk, I probably would have worried about it the HIV thing, cos I've lived in London a while and I seen a few friends die.

(Gay, 45+ HIV negative, I1/032)

It was 3 weeks ago. It was safe sex and the first time I had sex since splitting with my long term partner in June. I was on whisky. I must have had 5 or 6 whiskies... I have only had unprotected sex with my long term partner and I was tested in June. Did you talk about using condoms? Yes, the discussion did take place. I brought it up and he was more than happy to ensure that we used condoms.

(Gay, 36-45, HIV negative, I1/030)

Vodka. Between us probably a bottle... I was bottom, he fucked me. We always use condoms. We had the talk before this time.

(Gay, 26-35, HIV positive, I1/026)

In some encounters men begin high risk activity, yet even while under the influence of alcohol, they are able to stop and use condoms.

... but it wasn't in long. I got carried away and went oops and he threw a condom at me and I put it on. How long were you inside him? Maybe 30 seconds. What were you drinking? Wine, then went to vodka and amaretto. 2 large glasses of wine. I drank a third of a bottle of vodka and probably two thirds of a bottle of amaretto.

(Gay, 36-45, HIV negative, I2/095)

From the responses to the Diary Room survey it was possible to explore whether or not there was an association between using alcohol when having sex and the number of sexual partners in the last month. The results suggest that based on the responses, those who prefer to use alcohol during sex are more likely than those who do not, to have higher numbers of sexual partners in the past month.

Regret and wellbeing

Some men describe a sense of regret about decisions influenced by alcohol, which has an impact on their sense of mental wellbeing.

I drink like a fish and don't care about the consequences, makes me sad when I'm hung-over.

(Online respondent)

I live alone, I wouldn't say lonely but you go out more. This means drinking alcohol, so the next day or two, I feel down, a bit anxious. So I'm trying not to drink so much. It's with circumstances, I can feel anxious. And with alcohol, it's the old cliché, seems like a good idea at the time and the next day you think 'Oh my god did I do that?' I'm trying to be more responsible... I have spoken about it a bit at the clinic. I'd said I was worried about having unprotected sex but she just said 'oh well, just be careful, don't worry about it'. I know it's my choices ultimately... I know I make bad choices, I know the repercussions so it's only when I'm drunk that I don't think about it, that's what leaves me feeling down and anxious.

(Gay, 26-35, HIV negative, I3/018)

Condom use, alcohol and relationships

Men also identify alcohol as a factor in making decisions about condom use in a relationship. Rather than reaching the decision to stop condom use as a result of discussion, condoms might be dispensed with in the moment. Alcohol use can also affect decisions to have sex with an ex-partner.

I guess maybe we were having sex and there was a bit of alcohol involved and we just end up going for it. We always use lube. When we use condoms now, it's not really about HIV but cleanliness and that kind of stuff... Drunk enough that we were I guess not planning it or that sort of thing. Quite a few pints, probably about 4 or 5, and then other drinks as well, Jack and coke and a few shots... We probably spoke about it afterwards and said, 'um we should have used a condom', but now it's understood that if we are going to have sex he would put on a condom without really discussing.

(Gay, 16-25, HIV negative, I1/010)

Yes, that was probably about 9 or 10 months ago... my boyfriend. It's something we were thinking about because we both knew our status. We normally use condoms. I guess it's just one of these things that's drummed into you it feels better using them, as in because it's safe sex. Maybe there's a hygiene thing as well. I guess it's just in the back of my head, slightly paranoid about being hygienic. Did you have anything to drink? It was Saturday night, so a fair amount. Maybe a bottle of wine each. I think it was something we had been talking about for a while. Having something to drink, we decided not to [use condoms]. It was just a natural progression. We both came inside each other. It was a kind of positive experience it was different quite a nice change. I almost kind of felt closer more kind of intimate. We didn't really discuss it at length but it seemed to be kind of positive for both. We used condoms after that, I'm not actually sure of why It's just that we use condoms.

(Gay, 16-25, HIV negative, I1/060)

The most recent full sex without a condom was with an ex-partner. We keep in touch still I would say he's a friend now. There would have been alcohol on the most recent time. I'd been out for a drink and I visited him on the way home. And I stayed... I fucked him. To be honest, I'd taken quite a bit of alcohol so it didn't last that long... We broke up last year but since we broke up we've had sex about 5 times and about 3 times in the last year we've had penetrative sex without a condom. I don't normally like getting fucked but he has fucked me and he has cum inside me. I trust him but it's one of those things, like you have a headache after and you wonder, 'what have I done?'

(Gay, 36-45, HIV negative, I1/007)

Alcohol and payment for sex

FAQ interviewees suggest that alcohol use is prevalent as a form of currency in sex work. (More on related issues go to the FAQ **Payment for Sex** chapter).

He paid me for sex. It depends. Every time I see a person, whatever it could be twice maybe three times a week. Yeah, I got cash £60 and alcohol and we took drugs together. I stayed at his house... Vodka about 3, 4, actually large ones... I always use a condom. Just after we had a drink and that we went to the bedroom and the condoms and that were lying there.

(Bisexual, 36-45, HIV negative, I1/078)

Long vodkas. About 3 or 4 and then we went to the hotel. We had something at the hotel bar a pint and a can out of the wee mini bar in the room. Normally when I do go out they have alcohol in the house and ask me if I want one. I always get a drink anyway... they don't give me drugs. My regulars don't know that I take drugs.

(Heterosexual, 26-35, HIV negative, I1/080)

Sometimes it takes a wee while, with the drugs and alcohol I sometimes pass out and wake up after a few hours alone and with my trousers around my ankle. Sometimes I see the condom and know what happened but a lot of time I can't remember who done it. I'd rather be in a relationship but when people I get in a relationship they find out what I used to do, it ended up not happening. My mood drops and I go back to doing street work.

(Gay, 26-35, HIV negative, I1/047)

I've never paid for sex. I was paid for sex a couple of times when I was younger. It kind of gets into your definitions of paying for sex. When you're out partying if you're taking their drugs it's known you'll have sex... I think it's something that a lot of people deny. They would be aghast at the suggestion that laying on drink and drugs for sex is buying it.

(Gay, 36-45, HIV negative, I2/106)

Alcohol and violence

Alcohol use also features in the experiences of violence men report.

Yes. I was in a relationship with a man for a year. We broke up just about a year ago. He was drinking and would get violent. One time he really flew into me jumped on me punched me kept doing it and said he was going to murder me... After that we tried to make things work but two weeks later, I was just like I don't want to be in a relationship with you. He had been violent before with me and with other people. Alcohol was the main trigger but he just wasn't right I don't think. It was only one or two times before this but not serious but it was getting worse and worse.

(Gay, 16-25, HIV negative, I2/035)

It was with my current partner and to be honest with you it's always been as a result of bad communication in conjunction with alcohol where things have been blown out of proportion. It doesn't happen often anymore and it probably was something that happened in the lead up to us sitting down and discussing that we need an open relationship. It was a time of frustration because we both had a desire to go with other men but we didn't know how to talk about it.

(Gay, 26-35, HIV negative, I3/038)

Men's experiences of physical, emotional and sexual abuse in adulthood and childhood sexual abuse are discussed in more detail in the FAQ chapter on **Violence**.

Making changes

When engaging in the FAQ project some men reflect on their alcohol use, seeking a healthier lifestyle and changing the decisions they make about alcohol.

[Interviewee discussing drug and alcohol use and taking a break from sex] I had lots of unprotected sex last year and went for a screening in January so I'm trying to give myself a couple of months for the window period. To see for sure if I'm HIV negative and I'll reassess what I'm looking for in a sex life. I've also been making quite a lot of other changes in my life as well. Sometimes it's good to stop and figure out what you want to carry on with and what you want to stop doing.

(Gay, 36-45, HIV negative, I1/106)

Discussing alcohol with a sexual health service

Based on the responses from the FAQ Diary Room survey (427 respondents) we were interested to see if there was an association between using alcohol during sex and ever visiting a sexual health clinic. The test reveals that there is an association between using alcohol during sex and visiting a sexual health clinic; men who prefer to use alcohol during sex are more likely than those who do not, to have visited a clinic (74.6% vs. 61.6%). Similarly, those men who do not like alcohol during sex are more likely than those who do, to have *never* attended a clinic (38.4% vs. 25.4%). With men who drink attending clinics, this suggests that alcohol use is a topic of conversation worth pursuing in clinical engagements.

In the themed **Alcohol** online survey (58 men responded to this question) we were able to ascertain men's interest in discussing alcohol in the clinic setting; we asked men if they *have ever discussed alcohol/their drinking with someone at a sexual health clinic* and *would they ever do so*. While only 12 men (16.7%) have ever discussed alcohol/their drinking at a clinic, the majority, 46 men (64.8%), might or would discuss it.

In the context of an open ended question as part of the survey, a number of online respondents gave responses to an invitation to ask any question about alcohol/their drinking; these express a desire for support with alcohol use and pose questions about the impact on health and choices. Online comments/questions are as follows:

Most people my age/gender use alcohol to initiate sexual encounters. Is my experience typical of gay men my age?

(Online respondent)

Am I drinking too much?

(Online respondent)

How do you say 'no' to friends who encourage you to drink?

(Online respondent)

How to be more open to talking to guys without having to drink.

(Online respondent)

Is drinking and having sex a dangerous mix?

(Online respondent)

Why does it affect your libido?

(Online respondent)

How bad is it for your health?

(Online respondent)

How does alcohol consumption contribute to the spread of STIs in the LGBT community, if at all?

(Online respondent)