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21st birthday coming up ? Should I drink? ^[1]

Dear Alice,

My 21st birthday is coming up. I've already had two sets of friends and my mom's boyfriend offer to take me to the bar for drinks. The problem is, I have never been drunk before, let alone consumed alcohol. I chose not to drink for a few different reasons and am not sure if I should change anything for my birthday. On the other hand, I feel that I am obliged to go out drinking on this "special occasion."

? Sober 'til 21 (or maybe later)

Answer

Dear Sober 'til 21 (or maybe later),

Despite the seemingly mandatory U.S. cultural imperative to throw down and get wasted on your 21st, how you spend your birthday is up to you. While abstaining from drinking is a respectable and valid choice, moderate drinking ^[2], rather than getting drunk, is another option for celebrating this milestone. What's most critical is assessing how comfortable you feel with the different options.

The big 2-1 is marked as a special occasion in the United States, because the government sets the legal drinking limit at this particular birthday. In some other countries, the legal drinking age is younger (18 or even 16), making the 21st birthday in these places just another year to celebrate. You could certainly adapt this mindset to your impending benchmark and continue with your non-alcoholic modus operandi. On the other hand, taking your friends or mom's boyfriend up on their offer may be a new, exciting experience. The choice is yours.

The social aspect and the company kept while drinking moderately (otherwise known as lower-risk drinking ^[3]) are two reasons why people choose to "enjoy a drink or two" occasionally. As you may know, there's huge variation in the degree that people, both under 21 and over, approach alcohol. The National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Addiction ^[4] (NIAAA) found that while about 70 percent of all adults (18 or older) in the United States consumed alcohol in the last year, only about one quarter engaged in heavy drinking (five or more drinks during one occasion). In other words, those who get drunk are in the minority. So, you're in good company in your choice not to drink!

As you get closer to the big event, consider your original reasons for choosing not to drink. Do you feel these reasons still fit well with your life? Has anything changed for you (other than

getting a little older) since you made this decision? If you do decide to flash that newly-minted I.D. and drink on your birthday, it might be helpful to express your intentions to the folks you're with and let them know how much you'd like to drink or what you'd like to try. If you do decide to drink on the heavier side, it's wise to do so in a safer environment, where you're in the company of friends who have your best interest in mind. For more information on drinking in a smarter, safer, and responsible way, check out [How can I be a responsible guest while drinking?](#) ^[5] in the *Go Ask Alice!* archives.

In the end, you will still be the same person the day following your 21st birthday, whether you spent the night drinking water, having a six pack, or enjoying a glass of pinot noir. Whether you decide to stick to your plan of non-use or experiment with your new legal privilege to drink alcohol, this birthday has promise to be one of the most memorable.

Cheers!

Alice!

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