

No sex please, I'm sober

Carolyn Tate on getting your drink on before getting it on

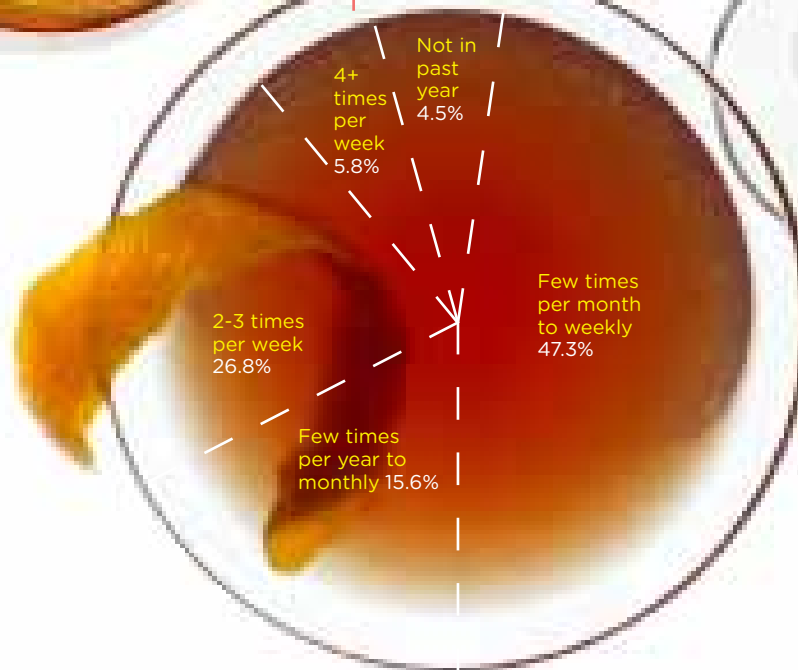
1 Drinking and sex have gone together like Antony and Cleopatra since, well, Antony and Cleopatra's time. So it's really no surprise that a study commissioned by FemFresh found one in seven women in a relationship can't face having sex without "alcoholic assistance". Then there's the one in 20 who've never had sex sober. Ever.

Think about it – how often do you have sex stone-cold sober? How many times have you met a future partner without a drink in hand? And how many alcohol-free dates have you been on? When I considered all this, I realised the most surprising thing about these stats was that six in seven women have sex *without* a drink, because when I thought about my social circle, I realised we could smack those numbers out of the park.

As Ann Dowsett Johnston wrote in *Drink: The Intimate Relationship Between Women and Alcohol*, "Romance and the glass: inextricable." Yep, the foundation of so many of our relationships – including mine – has revolved around grog. If the gin and tonic had never been invented, I'm not sure I would've had the confidence to speak to any of the men I went on to date in my 20s. It was the social lubricant required to turn me from a reclusive cat lady into a social being with the ability to string a couple of sentences together.

Then I met my future husband – our first date was an "after-work drink" that lasted until 4am and involved enough bevies to cater a post-formal party. There were our courting and moving-in-together years: lots of

HOW OFTEN ARE MARRIED COUPLES SEXING?*



*THE KINSEY INSTITUTE. PHOTOGRAPHY: ADAM VOORHES/GALLERY STOCK/SNAPPER MEDIA

indulgent dinners accompanied by bottles of pinot gris, and him impressing me with his martini-making skills.

Next we got married (hurray, champagne!) and honeymooned in Thailand (yippee, cheap margaritas!). Then we started having babies. Thud. Tumbleweeds. Punctuated by mostly wine-fuelled sexy sessions.

The sex and booze cocktail

You don't need science to convince you about the existence of beer goggles, but there is solid proof that we're more likely to pick up people we might not otherwise find attractive when we're drinking. In her time as a graduate student at Harvard University, Dr Sharon Wilsnack (now an adjunct professor of psychology at the University of North Dakota) divided a bunch of students into two groups, feeding one lot soft drink and the other alcohol (where was she when I was at uni?), then tested their attitudes to a series of pictures they were shown. As well as finding others more appealing, women are inclined to rate themselves more attractive after a few drinks. So there's the obvious attraction/alcohol link.

Then there's FemFresh's view – they reckon many women's "need" for alcohol pre-sex comes down to a lack of body confidence, which is a fair call. For me, three pregnancies, 136 weeks' total breastfeeding and good ol' gravity may have wreaked some level of havoc on my ageing body, and drinking is able to shift my focus elsewhere. For singles, booze provides extra courage to get someone into bed, as well as enhanced body confidence when they make it there. Yet I think there's more to it than that. For me, wine is mostly about drawing a line under the day of work stress, money issues and tantrums in Target. Alcohol provides a sexual shortcut because we don't have the time or energy to be tantric gurus a la Sting and Trudie Styler.

WH health expert Dr Ginni Mansberg points out that marriage kind of takes sex off the table (or, more literally, bed). "We want our husbands to provide for us and take on all these unsexy roles, but we also want them to give us excitement. They're two opposite ends of the spectrum." Enter: booze, the liquid thrill booster.

Bringing on less-boozy sex

For women in long-term relationships who don't often get jiggy sans grog, psychologist Esther Perel recommends putting an end to that romantic expectation of spontaneity: "Everything spontaneous that was going to happen in your relationship has already happened," she says. "Committed sex is premeditated sex. It's wilful; it's intentional." She also recommends remembering to regularly engage erotically with your partner – not just immediately

before sex. "Foreplay is not something you do five minutes before the real thing. It starts pretty much at the end of the previous orgasm." Right on.

And is it really such a bad thing to use wine as a lubricant, as long as you're not drinking so much that you're putting yourself at risk of STIs and unwanted pregnancy? "If you're in a good relationship, and drinking's what you need to do to make sure you have sex, at least you're having sex and that's a start," says Mansberg. "But one of the most difficult things for women is having the confidence – without alcohol – to ask for what they want [sexually]. If they can learn to do that, it can lead to more pleasure for everyone."

However, WH relationships expert Dr Traci Coventry reminds us that moderation is the key. "To paraphrase Shakespeare: alcohol provokes desire but inhibits performance. It can also provoke an enhanced sense of self-esteem – it's a central nervous system depressant, so it can reduce anxiety about physical attractiveness, intimacy, social situations and sexual performance. In short, it can make you

feel as womanly and sexy as Halle Berry, but has also been shown to thwart orgasm and decrease sexual responsiveness in women. In other words, you feel sexier but are less able to be sexual – not the best combination," she says.

It's a good idea to have at least some sex with a blood alcohol concentration of zero (if you really can't, that's pointing to a deeper issue). So find a good medium when it comes to the number of drinks you have, as well as the number of occasions.

And how much alcohol tips the balance? The National Health and Medical Research Council recommends having no more than two standard drinks a day, and a max of four drinks when you're having a "big night", for health's sake.

Those limits would probably help prevent singles putting themselves in risky situations; and tired, been-together-for-years couples ending up snoring next to each other on the couch before having a chance to get intimate. Sounds like I have experience with that one, doesn't it? This is why I've decided to take Perel's advice and make intimacy a priority, plus find elements of mystery in a bloke I've come to know inside and out. As French writer Marcel Proust said: "The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes, but in having new eyes." Cheers to that. *wh*

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