

Moderate alcohol intoxication does not impair recall of sexual assault, shows study

February 1 2023



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Women are able to recall details of sexual assault and rape with accuracy, even if they have drunk—or expected to drink—moderate amounts of alcohol.

A study conducted at the University of Birmingham demonstrated that women who had drunk [alcohol](#) up to the legal limit for driving were able to recall details of an assault in a hypothetical scenario, including details of activities to which they had, and had not, consented.

Even women who expected to drink alcohol but were, in fact, given only tonic water to drink showed an increased awareness of their surroundings and interactions.

The findings, published in *Frontiers in Psychology—Forensic and Legal Psychology*, are an important step towards challenging courtroom perceptions of women being unreliable as witnesses in cases where they were intoxicated at the time an assault took place.

Professor Heather Flowe, in the University's School of Psychology, led the research. "We know that [sexual assault](#) frequently coincides with [alcohol intoxication](#)," she said. "This means that, during trials, victims' and witnesses accounts will often be contested, which is one of the reasons why so few cases lead to conviction for defendants and this needs to change."

In the study, researchers worked with 90 women and asked them to take part in a hypothetical rape scenario under one of four conditions. Roughly half the group were given an [alcoholic drink](#), while the other half were given tonic water. However, within each group, some of the women were told they would be drinking alcohol, but were in fact given tonic water, and some were told their drink was tonic water, whereas it actually contained vodka.

The women then worked through a written (on screen) and audio presented account of an encounter between themselves and a man and asked to imagine how they would actually think and feel if the incident happened to them. As the scenario unfolded, the women were asked to

make decisions about whether or not to continue with the encounter. If they made a decision to end the encounter, they were presented with a screen detailing a hypothetical rape taking place at the end of the evening.

Seven days following the experiment, the women were asked to complete a questionnaire asking them to answer questions about the events of the evening.

The researchers found that women who consumed alcohol during the experiment were just as accurate in remembering consensual and non-consensual sexual activities. In particular, the researchers found no evidence to support the idea that if a woman participated in consensual sex while intoxicated, she might later remember it as non-consensual.

The study also showed that the participants who expected to consume alcohol—whether they did so or not—were more accurate, overall, in remembering specific details about the rape. This suggests that [women](#) are likely to become 'hypervigilant' in situations where they believe themselves to be under the influence of alcohol and so more vulnerable.

Co-author on the paper, Laura Stevens, added: "This research challenges a key myth about victim's memories regarding rape and sexual assault, which is often used to dismiss the victim's account. We hope this work will lead to changes in the way courts and [expert witnesses](#) manage testimony from alleged victims of [rape](#) and sexual [assault](#)."

The team plans to continue their research, testing recall at different levels of intoxication and also improving the realism of the scenario presented.

More information: Laura M. Stevens et al, Acute alcohol intoxication and alcohol expectancy effects on women's memory for consensual and

non-consensual sexual activity, *Frontiers in Psychology—Forensic and Legal Psychology* (2023). [DOI: 10.3389/fpsyg.2022.1008563](https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.1008563)

Provided by University of Birmingham

Citation: Moderate alcohol intoxication does not impair recall of sexual assault, shows study (2023, February 1) retrieved 23 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2023-02-moderate-alcohol-intoxication-impair-recall.html>

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