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8 Questions About Booze You Were Afraid to Ask

For example: Why can't I drink rubbing alcohol?

April 21, 2014 | 04:41 PM By Jess Novak, Special Contributor



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Have you ever had a question about alcohol and thought it was too silly to ask? Yes? Then you've come to the right place. We'll be answering your beer, wine, and spirits-related questions here in a regular column devoted to exploring and exploding myths, explaining problems, and offering advice for the alcohol-minded.

8 Questions About Booze You Were Afraid to Ask (Slideshow)

Q: Why Can't I Drink Rubbing Alcohol?

A: Well, of course you *can*, but it's a really bad idea. Why? Well, to start with, "rubbing alcohol" doesn't actually mean just one thing; it is a general term that can get slapped on the label of two different substances. If you're using rubbing alcohol for its intended purpose (as a solvent and disinfectant), these two chemicals will do the same job, but they become distinctly less interchangeable if you're trying

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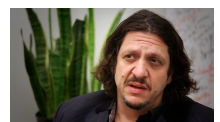
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to get tipsy on them.

Some rubbing alcohol really is a super-high-proof version of *ethyl alcohol*: also called *ethanol*, this is the booze you're used to drinking — it's found in all beer, wine, and liquor. However, most rubbing alcohol (and all rubbing alcohol sold in the United States) has been *denatured*, which means that it has been rendered undrinkable by the addition of various poisons and bittering agents. In some countries, alcohol that has been denatured must be dyed violet or purple to identify it from drinking alcohol. Why, you may reasonably ask, would anybody go and take perfectly drinkable alcohol and make it unfit for human consumption? The answer: taxes. As you know, rubbing alcohol costs about \$2 a bottle at your pharmacy, but drinking alcohol is much more expensive — mostly because booze has a hefty spirits tax. In order to avoid paying sin taxes on a substance you only use to clean your faucets, ethanol marked "rubbing alcohol" gets the denaturing treatment.[slideshow:

So that's your answer should your particular bottle of rubbing alcohol be filled with ethyl alcohol, but what about the other kind? The other type of rubbing alcohol is actually *isopropyl alcohol*, which is a completely different molecule from the alcohol you know and love. While isopropyl alcohol is not nearly as dangerous as its cousin *methanol*, also known as wood alcohol (even one ounce of methanol can legitimately leave you blind or kill you), isopropanol is insanely potent, and a very small amount could do major damage or be deadly. When it comes to isopropanol, the line between "getting a little tipsy" and "dying in a seriously unfortunate manner" is thin enough that it's really not worth the risk. Plus, it can get metabolized into acetone: yeah, nail polish remover. Ew.

Q: What Are Tannins?



A: Tannins are a kind of flavonoid that occurs naturally in everything from berries to red beans to nuts, although we associate them particularly with red wines. Have you ever taken a sip of red wine and felt as though your mouth had turned into a cartoon of the Mojave desert? Tannins are the culprit. Found on the skin of grapes, as well as in the seeds (known as pips) and stems, tannins can create that sensation of dryness in your mouth, but they also add a mild bitterness to red wines which we generally find pleasant. Tannins are responsible for increasing a wine's complexity; they extend its finish, and can help preserve it by preventing oxidation. Tannins generally get milder with

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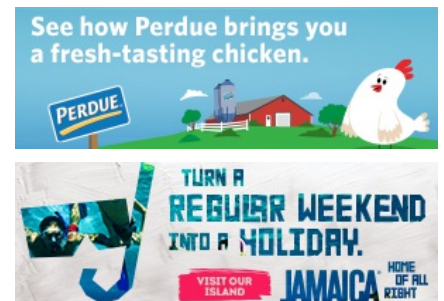
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age and can lend a velvety richness to older wines.

Q: Can You Throw Any Alcohol on a Wound to Clean It? Is a Margarita or Beer Just as Good as Rubbing Alcohol?



A: In the movies, when a cowboy gets shot, he always takes a big swig of rough-looking whiskey, steels himself, pours a splash over his bullet wound, and yanks the bullet out himself in a terrifically brave fashion.

There's a lot about this scenario that we don't recommend in real life, but first is the idea that you should pour any alcohol at all on an open wound. However, if you want to disinfect a small scrape or clean your skin super thoroughly, isopropanol or pure ethanol isn't a bad bet (and is a major ingredient in hand sanitizers). When it comes to the alcohol you drink, however, things tend to get a little trickier. One good rule of thumb is that the higher the alcohol content and the purer the alcohol, the cleaner you'll make things — so rubbing alcohol is best, followed by grain alcohol, vodka, then whiskey — you get the idea. If there's a bunch of stuff mixed into the alcohol that isn't really alcohol-related at all (yeast, sugar, sour mix, maraschino cherries, chocolate syrup, etc.) the less clean you'll make things. If you're actually hurt, of course your first step should be going to a doctor — not rummaging about the liquor cabinet. If you want to clean a scrape on your knee with whatever you have around the house, though, you should really use rubbing alcohol — and definitely don't use wine, beer, or, um, a margarita, all of which are decidedly not sterile and could actually make the situation worse.

Read on for more 8 Questions About Booze You Were Afraid to Ask

Have questions about booze? Submit yours and they just might get answered in a future column: tweet them right to Jess Novak, the Drink Editor of The Daily Meal, [@jessthenovak](#)

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