First off, I promise you this isn’t going to be your average alcohol lecture. It’s way nerdier than that. Humans and alcohol’s love affair started during the agricultural revolution when grain, water, and some yummy bacteria fermented in bowls. More like a boozy grain porridge in its earliest forms than any beer we’d recognize today, there’s no denying the vital role that alcohol has played over the millennia as nutrition, sanitary form of hydration, currency, a holy substance, taboo temptation, and regular ole party drug. Alcohol usage of all kinds has been recorded in nearly every culture, be it in a positive or negative way. But just like we see with other psychoactive substances humans have used, the problems associated with alcohol became that much worse when we started refining it to be more potent.

From the festivals of Dionysus and Bacchus to the use of alcohol as a status symbol today, humans have long seen it as a social substance, for better or for worse. But for as long as we’ve been drinking alcohol, we don’t see a lot of historical drunks so to speak outside of those celebratory times or the excess of certain nobility.

Britain’s Gin Alley is where we first see what we define now as alcoholism on a population wide scale. Beforehand, alcohol was usually reserved for celebrations if you weren’t nobility and would often be served watered down. Even when higher percentages were being produced the taxes alone kept it from most of the population. But when production became industrialized and they could make it at significantly less cost on a mass scale, taxes went down as well and suddenly people who only had access to a maximum of 10% a few times a year (though oftentimes was more around 2-5%) suddenly were able to get entire bottles of 40% gin or hop down to the local pub after work and get much more drunk off of the liquors than beer or wine. Considering the horrific working conditions and basic dignity afforded to most of the lower class at the time, it’s not surprising that it became the preferred way of self-medicating the pain from backbreaking factory jobs at the time. This increased potency and availability meant it was possible to develop a daily dependence, and the notorious Gin Alley was born.

While we understand its addictive potential more today, we still culturally don’t really take it seriously. Nor do we ever really acknowledge the negative health effects, aside from some select health influencers selling cleanses. While those cleanses aren’t good for you either, alcohol is a toxin just like a lot of the other psychoactive substances humans enjoy. Even in small doses it can cause gastrointestinal disruption, and we’ve all had to suffer through at least one Hangover movie to at least know it can make the next day a miserable slog to get through even when you swear you didn’t drink *that* much. The side effects of alcohol aren’t fun to deal with even in small doses, let alone the nights you have a drink or two more than you said you would. There’s not a whole lot of benefits to drinking alcohol from a health standpoint now that we’re not living through the transition into stable agriculture. Regular usage is bad for your body, regardless of if you’re what’s medically considered to be a heavy drinker or not. A

So there’s the access part of things, but what about culturally? Do we take the health risks of alcohol more seriously now than we did in the old days? Absolutely not!

Not only is alcoholism written off as a joke in media most of the time, but the role alcohol consumption plays in our social and cultural lives in the United States is often overlooked, until you try and get sober. From the general acceptance of underage drinking as a rite of passage, to jokes of “you’re not an alcoholic until you graduate!” and the normalization of weekend benders you spend the next week complaining about recovering from, we really like bonding over drinking, just like we always have. But we do know now how dangerous excessive and long-term alcohol use can be, and we often overlook it as some eventuality that likely, “won’t happen to us.”

But between the jokes and the parties and bar crawls, there’s real health and psychological effects to alcohol usage that aren’t taken as seriously as warnings about opiates or the old school propaganda around cannabis. Like how alcohol withdrawals can kill you quite easily, or how mixing alcohol and cocaine, a very popular combination, metabolizes into cocaethylene in the liver. Cocaethylene is thirty times more toxic to your body than cocaine, and if you continue drinking once it’s metabolized and entered your bloodstream it can cause a stroke, heart damage, liver damage, or just stop your heart entirely. Permanently.

While most of us know the risks of drunk driving, and there’s some awareness once you get to college around alcohol poisoning and the Good Samaritan law protecting the caller and patient the long term health risks of alcohol are what really seem to be passed over in warnings about usage. Aside from weakening the immune system over time and being a depressant, cancer risk of certain cancers is significantly increased, heart, liver, brain, and gastrointestinal damage can occur as well as heart disease, liver disease, and high blood pressure that can lead to strokes. Alcohol dependence is also known to have devastating effects on people’s social and familial relationships and very rarely affects only the person using.

People also tend to greatly underestimate the amount of alcohol and kind of drinking habits it takes to be at risk of these harmful effects. It’s not necessarily about daily drinking or if you don’t engage in “risky” behaviors, but about how much you ingest when you do drink. Sitting through most drug education sessions will teach you that Heavy drinking is defined by having 8 or more drinks a week for women, and 15 or more drinks for men, with binge drinking defined as having 4 or more drinks during a single occasion for women, and 5 for men. Both of these will definitely put you in the red zone if you’re doing them on the regular, but even moderate drinking can put you at risk of this long-term damage.

Like many of the psychoactive substances us humans like, alcohol is toxic to the body. We just control its toxicity, so we get the effects we want without killing us outright. Mixing with other psychoactive substances or even just medications and supplements can cause unforeseen interactions in the body, even if they’re “common” combinations because we don’t talk about those risks enough. It’s common to laugh off the warnings around alcohol because it’s presence is so prevalent around us but it kills 3 million people a year. Those numbers do include vehicular accidents which account for about 28% of those deaths, but it only just beats out the deaths caused by digestive issues and cardiovascular problems. And unlike opiates, there’s no medication to treat alcohol use disorder. Its accessibility can make it incredibly difficult to quit drinking when again, that liquor store may be the only place to get your groceries in town and is much easier to get to than a doctor or therapist to enter treatment. Not to mention cheaper.

Liquor stores, or party stores as we call them, are often easier to access than a real grocery store. In the United States you may not be able to get to a proper grocery store for a fifty mile radius, but there’ll be at least one party store for every town you stop at along the way. Placement of these stores is not at the fault of consumers who are at the mercy of what businesses are open in their area and the access they have to those places, but rather the ways that the United States infrastructure has prioritized the profits of these companies over public health. This isn’t just about the ease of access to alcohol, but the lack of access to an overall healthy, affordable, and stable diet. Oftentimes it’s these party stores, gas stations, and dollar stores that play the role of grocery stores in many communities. So not only is cheap and potent alcohol available everywhere, it’s primarily sold alongside high sugar and high fat snack food that’s of greater availability than fresh produce, let alone any fancy vegan alternatives. In terms of infrastructure, alcohol and junk food is of higher priority and significantly more accessible physically and financially than fresh veggies. So the solution also can’t just be, “close all the liquor stores and restrict access to alcohol” because quite famously we tried that before and failed spectacularly.

There’s also this idea we have in our society of a “functioning alcoholic,” or someone who drinks excessively but seemingly to their friends and coworkers have no negative social effects from alcohol use disorder. And there are thousands of people who can drink without developing a dependence or having it negatively impact their lives. The issue is more what that amount of alcohol consumption is doing to their body long term, regardless of how socially functional they may be. It’s also important to keep in mind that you may not actually know what’s going on in others lives or how their loved ones may be impacted in ways you don’t see by alcohol use. In our society we tend to measure our success and worth in terms of our productivity, but a person’s productivity doesn’t tell you anything about their lives. Even in medical definitions we tend to still restrict these disorders to when they are disruptive to work or productivity, but we don’t acknowledge them as true problems up until that point.

This isn’t just a United States problem either, it’s a global issue that many countries are attempting to grapple with, especially as more and more access is gained to the refined, potent liquors globally. Even in places where alcohol usage has been common for centuries, when we see high-proof liquors become cheaper and more available, we see the same wave of alcohol use disorders that we did in Gin Alley all those years ago. The formula of more potent = more addictive, and more access still stands today and alcohol tolerance is something we celebrate instead of shying away from.

What we also see in this world of access and increased potency is that cultures and countries that have an expectation of moderation in their drinking have less issues with risky drinking behavior and excessive use disorders. Countries like France and Italy are often cited as successes in this area, there are often cultural expectations that adolescents are taught when they start drinking, often in their homes with family members over a meal, there is more of a focus on what they’re drinking and the experience of it than the idea of drinking for intoxication. This cultural appreciation of the alcohol is allegedly one of the reasons that use disorders appear to not be as common in these areas, as well as the early education around how to “properly,” drink. This also has seemed to curb serious youth alcohol usage in those countries and studies show young adults in those countries tend to engage in less risky behavior when drinking and avoid excessive binge drinking. That’s not to say there’s no issues at all in those countries around alcohol, but there’s a general culture around alcohol consumption thanks to those country’s history as wine producers.

If you take anything from this podcast, just remember that alcohol is like any other psychoactive substance in that it has its own potential for abuse, dependence, and harm if used in excess or with other substances. If you notice your friends or loved ones drinking in ways that aren’t necessarily healthy or seem to be setting them up for long term harm and you’re concerned, I promise that checking in with them in a non-judgmental way about your concern is being a good friend. If you’re going to drink, be safe, be smart, be responsible, and for the love of everything please don’t drive.