Why does the effect of alcohol vary?

Maybe you just drank too much—or maybe there was something else going on too. Here’s how that can happen:

- **You believed you’d drunk more alcohol than you really did**
  Your response to alcohol depends partly on what you think you consumed. That’s the placebo effect.

- **You were in an unfamiliar place or situation**
  If you’re drinking someplace new, you may get more drunk than usual on the same amount of alcohol.

- **You changed your drink**
  Drinking different types of alcohol—drinks that are new to you—may also lower your tolerance, even if the actual alcohol content is what you’re used to.

**Why?** Your tolerance to alcohol (or any other drug) is partly psychological. Your brain relies on unconscious cues related to where, how, and with whom you usually drink. In unfamiliar situations those cues are disrupted, and so is your tolerance.

**Takeaway**
New place? New people? New drink? It’s especially important to pace yourself. Familiar place? Familiar people? You may not feel impaired, but your driving still could be.

Sources:

For more on the surprising effects of alcohol, see *Student Health 101*, April 2016.