

## Health Tidbits

Many college students may think that moderate drinking has no negative effects on learning and health. As little as one drink, however, can impair a person's ability to get a good night's sleep, which can lead to more significant problems. Disturbances of sleep lead to fatigue and sleepiness during the day. The more one drinks, the faster the person will fall asleep, but the likelihood of sleep disturbances increases.

Most people assume that passing out from drinking is no big deal. They see it happening a lot and don't see or hear about any ill effects in the person who passed out. The fact is that you pass out due to the body's inability to tolerate the amount of alcohol that you have put into it. Alcohol is a central nervous system depressant that works to slow down the heart rate, lower your blood pressure, and slow your breathing rate. Once your brain has been depressed enough by the alcohol, you pass out. The amount of alcohol it takes to make you pass out is dangerously close to the amount of alcohol it takes to make you dead.

Most people expect to get their buzz back if they continue drinking because of a belief that continued alcohol consumption equals continued good feelings. However, because of how alcohol works in the body, it's just not like that. The good feelings that alcohol elicits are typically associated with the initial rise in the BAC level. After BAC rises above .05-.06, the experience tends not to be as positive. The depressant effects kick in—more emotional, reaction time diminishes, balance and movement start to become impaired, judgment becomes impaired, etc. If you continue to drink the depressant effects will take over the experience and put you in a high risk situation.

## How Much is Too Much?

You'd have to be living under a rock or perhaps on a college campus, to not know that there have been several college students in Minnesota who have died from their use of alcohol, namely alcohol poisoning.

Alcohol poisoning is an overdose of alcohol. Alcohol poisoning is deadly. The brain begins to shut down involuntary functions that regulate breathing and heart rate sometimes resulting in death. The amount of alcohol that causes alcohol poisoning is different for every person. It is not possible to accurately predict for each person what amount will cause an overdose.

Alcohol poisoning is not a pretty subject. It's not a topic people really want to have a conversation about. It involves crude bodily functions, bad smells, and messes. When we hear of a person who has died as a result of alcohol poisoning, typically what has happened is one of two things:

1. The person stopped breathing. The depressant level of the alcohol was so high that the drinker simply stopped breathing and his or her heart stopped beating.
2. The person choked on vomit. The drinker passed out, was laying on his/her back, threw up and choked on the vomit.

Is this a new phenomenon?  
Are students today drinking

in a much more risky way than students in the past? "Drinking oneself to death" is most associated with down and out alcoholics who were totally out of control with their drinking.

The truth is that a large percentage of the alcohol poisoning deaths (past and present) were young people—some who never drank before, some who typically drink moderately but for a variety of reasons drank heavily on the one occasion (examples—hard semester, break up, family issues, 21st birthday, big football game, pre-partying before a night out....) and some who were heavy drinkers. It has only been since the 1990's that we have had much media coverage on college students death due to alcohol poisoning. Until the 1990's, deaths due to alcohol poisoning were largely ignored by the media. College campuses, where many of the deaths occurred, sought to avoid adverse publicity. Death certificates said "cardiac arrest" or asphyxiation". Medical examiners sometimes chose to tell a grieving family, "It was a freak accident," rather than "Your son/daughter drank him/herself to death. In 1994, a Federal law was passed requiring colleges to publish all student deaths. The issue became much more apparent.

I'm not devoting this newsletter to the topic of alcohol poisoning because I want to scare you, shame you, or convince you that alcohol is bad. I do want to do something that recognizes the potential lost in the deaths of those young people and in some small way to give their

death meaning by honestly discussing what caused their deaths. I do believe it could happen here. Death is the unintended consequence of heavy drinking. Since we have heavy drinking happening on our campuses, there is the risk of an unintended alcohol poisoning death. So, what I would like to do is provide some information, some food for thought, so to speak, and ask that you take some time to think about the information, think about your own behaviors and have some discussions with your friends, floor mates, etc.

### High Risk Drinking

- Participating in drinking games
- Celebratory drinking (21st birthday, "the big game", end of semester, graduation....)
- Pre-partying/pre-loading
- Drinking to get drunk
- Doing shots
- Chugging
- Using a funnel, hose, trough or punch bowl
- Mixing alcohol with any drugs (legal or illegal)
- Not knowing what you are drinking or how much you are drinking
- Combining alcohol with energy drinks

If you are concerned about your or a friend's alcohol use, call 3236 or 5605 and talk to a psychologist on staff.

## Blood Alcohol Content (BAC) Levels

.01—.07 You feel mildly relaxed, a little lightheaded. Your inhibitions are loosened, and you feel less cautious. Judgment abilities are slightly impaired. No real feeling of the depressant effects of alcohol seen yet. Your behavior may become exaggerated and your emotions intensified.

.08—.13 Your motor skills start to become impaired and your sense of balance may be compromised. Your emotions become a bit exaggerated—perhaps loud, perhaps aggressive. It is dangerous (and illegal) for you to drive. Your judgment is impaired and you may have difficulty evaluating sexual situations. You believe you are functioning better than you actually are.

.14—.19 The “good feelings” of euphoria begin to give way to some negative feelings such as anxiety and restlessness. You may begin feeling tired because the depressant qualities of alcohol begin to take effect. If you are a man, you will have difficulty achieving or maintaining an erection. You will have trouble walking or standing, and are at greater risk of hurting yourself physically. You may get nauseous.

.20—.24 You feel confused and disoriented. At this point you may experience nausea. You have trouble standing. You may not realize that you hurt yourself because you might not feel pain. Blackouts become likely at this point.

.25—.29 Almost all aspects of your brain are severely impaired. You may have passed out by this point. Vomiting is likely and the chance of asphyxiation on your own vomit is greatly increased. If you haven't passed out, the risk of personal injury is high because you have little to no physical control. You are emotionally numb.

.30—.34 If you are still conscious, you are in a stupor. You likely have no comprehension of where you are or what you are doing. There have been numerous cases of alcohol poisoning and death in this range of BAC. You are in need of medical help.

.35 & up You have reached the level of surgical anesthesia. Coma is possible. The lungs and heart rate are slowing to the point of stopping. You need immediate medical help.

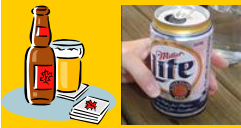
Your BAC is determined primarily by how much alcohol you have drunk, the rate of consumption, your weight and your gender. Other influences include: other drugs in system, hydration level, food in the stomach, type of drink. To get a clearer idea of how many drinks it would take you to reach the various levels go to:

<http://www.intox.com/wheel/drinkwheel.asp>

### Some Key Points About BAC

- If a person drinks faster than one drink per hour, the alcohol simply stays in the body, waiting its turn to be metabolized. The result is increasing levels of intoxication.
- A person's BAC can continue to rise even while he or she is passed out. Even after a person stops drinking, alcohol in the stomach and intestine continues to enter the bloodstream and circulate throughout the body.
- Rapid binge drinking is especially dangerous because the victim can ingest a fatal dose before becoming unconscious or exhibiting many of the other signs of alcohol poisoning.
- Combining alcohol with energy drinks may give people the “sensation” of reduced alcohol effects but does not alter BAC. (may not feel as drunk as you really are)
- If you choose to drink and want a pleasurable and less risky experience, you need to drink less, drink slowly, and keep your BAC under a .06.
- Alcohol is attracted to areas of the body with a lot of water. Fat contains very little water, and allows more alcohol to enter the blood stream. Women tend to have a higher percentage of fat. Therefore, if a man and a woman of the same weight ingest the same amount of alcohol the woman will tend to have a higher BAC.
- Only time can lower your BAC. Coffee, cold showers, and runs around the block will just leave you alert, wet, and out of breath.
- Tolerance, a term that means that after continued drinking, increasing amounts of alcohol are necessary to produce the same effect, does not have an effect on the actual BAC. (may not feel as drunk as you really are)

## Standard Drink Sizes (National Institutes of Health)



## Beer

12 oz. (malt liquor—8.5 oz.)



## Wine

5 oz.



## Hard Liquor

1.5 oz.



## Mixed Drink

1.5 oz. of hard liquor

## Typical Party Sizes



## Typical keg cup

16 oz.

(black line shows 1 standard drink of beer)

3 full keg cups of beer is about 4 standard drinks

6 full keg cups of beer is about 8 standard drinks

9 full keg cups of beer is about 12 standard drinks

Keg cup filled with wine is about 4 standard drinks

Keg cup filled with one mixed drink can be more than one or two standard drinks depending on how many shots are put into it.

A standard 750mL bottle of wine has 5 standard drinks.

A fifth of 80-proof “hard liquor” has approximately 17 standard drinks.

## Signs and Symptoms of Alcohol Poisoning

- Person is known to have consumed large quantities of alcohol
- Person is unconscious and cannot be awakened
- Person has cold, clammy, unusually pale or bluish skin
- Person is breathing slowly or irregularly, less than 8 times a minute or 10 seconds or more between breaths
- Person vomits while passed out and does not wake up during or after.

**If one or more of these are present, you need to take action.**

## Taking Action

There are steps that you can take if you encounter someone who could be suffering from acute alcohol poisoning. It is dangerous to assume a person will be fine by “just sleeping it off.”

- **Try to wake the person.** First, try to find out if the person is at all attentive. Are they unconscious? Can they be woken up? Try and call their name. Pinch their skin –because they should have some reaction. Remember, alcohol is a depressant and it will numb the nerves so by pinching the skin you can gauge how far along in the “overdose” process they are.
- **Turn the person on his/her side and do not leave the person alone.** You turn the person on his/her side so that if they get sick and vomit, the airways will not be blocked and they will not choke. Stay with them. Only leave if you have to go to a phone or to get someone to help you. Monitor the breathing. Make sure they do not roll over on their back.
- **Check skin color or temperature.** What is their skin color and temperature? Is enough blood getting to the skin? A sign that you should get help is if a person has pale or bluish skin, or the skin is cold or clammy. This person is not getting enough oxygen.
- **Check the person’s breathing.** How is the person breathing? If a person is breathing irregularly with a few breaths and then nothing for awhile, this is a sign that medical attention is necessary. If the person’s breathing is too slow or too shallow—less than 8 breaths a minute—or more than 10 seconds in between breaths—this is another sign you should get help.
- **There are no absolutes. Everyone is different.** These are just some of the potential signs of acute alcohol poisoning. A person may have one or all. For instance, there is no guarantee that if a person is breathing 9 times a minute they will be fine, or if they are breathing 7 times a minute they will die. If you cannot wake the person up at all, it is a serious situation. If you are at all concerned, **get help!!!!** Call 911, CSB Security at 5000 or SJU Life Safety at 2144.