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ALCOHOL POISONING

Excessive drinking can be hazardous to everyone's health! Some people laugh at the behavior of others who are drunk. Some think it's even funnier when they pass out. But there is nothing funny about the aspiration of vomit leading to asphyxiation or the poisoning of the respiratory center in the brain, both of which can result in death.

Do you know about the dangers of alcohol poisoning? When should you seek professional help for a friend? Sadly enough, too many say they wish they would have sought medical treatment for a friend. Many end up feeling responsible for alcohol-related tragedies that could have easily been prevented.

Common myths about sobering up include drinking black coffee, taking a cold bath or shower, sleeping it off, or walking it off. But these are just myths, and they don't work. The only thing that reverses the effects of alcohol is time - something you may not have if you are suffering from alcohol poisoning. And many different factors affect the level of intoxication of an individual, so it's difficult to gauge exactly how much is too much.

Can You Tell If You're Too Intoxicated?

Generally, you can't tell. First of all, alcohol impairs judgment, making your ability to reason difficult, especially at high doses. Second, it takes a while for all the alcohol in the stomach to travel out of the gastrointestinal system and into the blood supply, where it then reaches the brain and other organs. Depending upon how much you drink, how quickly you drink, and what else is in your stomach, it may take anywhere from about 30-90 minutes after you stop drinking, before you reach your highest level of intoxication. Although some drinking scenarios may require less or more time to reach the maximum level of intoxication, you can see that when you decide you have consumed enough alcohol and stop drinking, you will most probably continue to become even more intoxicated. Sweetly flavored alcoholic concoctions such as Jell-O shots, flavored brandies, schnapps or other drinks can go down easily and quickly but surprise you later on when they get into your brain. Similarly, drinking "games" can be quickly fatal because large quantities of alcohol are often consumed over very short periods of time. Almost-straight alcohol drinks, such as EverClear are especially dangerous.

How Much Alcohol will Result in an Overdose?

It's different for everyone. Variations in individuals' gender, body weight, and amount of food eaten before drinking are just a few of the things that can influence a person's Blood Alcohol Concentration (BAC). Nevertheless, even with these variations, one thing remains constant: once the BAC reaches a certain point (usually somewhere between .25 and .4), death due to the poisoning effects of alcohol is a near certainty!

(over)

A hand-drawn graphic with a black background and white text. The top part says '21st Birthday ≠ 21 Drinks' in a stylized, hand-painted font. Below this, there is a list of items considered as one drink: 4-5 ounces of wine, 10 ounces of wine cooler, 12 ounces of beer, and 1-1/4 ounces (a shot) of distilled liquor (80 proof whiskey, vodka, etc.). At the bottom, it states that more than 1,300 Americans die each year either as the direct result of alcohol overdose or in incidents where alcohol poisoning was mentioned as a contributing cause of death. The entire graphic is framed with a rough, hand-drawn border.

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What Happens to Your Body When You Get Alcohol Poisoning?

Alcohol depresses nerves that control involuntary actions such as breathing and the gag reflex (which prevents choking). A fatal dose of alcohol will eventually stop these functions.

It is common for someone who drank excessive alcohol to vomit since alcohol is an irritant to the stomach. There is then the danger of choking on vomit, which could cause death by asphyxiation in a person who is not conscious because of intoxication.

Remember that a person's blood alcohol concentration 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. It is dangerous to assume the person will be fine by sleeping it off.

Critical Signs for Alcohol Poisoning

- Mental confusion, stupor, coma, or person cannot be roused.
- Vomiting.
- Seizures.
- Slow breathing (fewer than eight breaths per minute).
- Irregular breathing (10 seconds or more between breaths).
- Hypothermia (low body temperature), bluish skin color, paleness.

What Should I Do If I Suspect Someone Has Alcohol Poisoning?

- Know the danger signals.
- Do not wait for all symptoms to be present.
- Be aware that a person who has passed out may die.
- If there is any suspicion of an alcohol overdose, call 911 for help. Don't try to guess the level of drunkenness.

What Can Happen to Someone With Alcohol Poisoning That Goes Untreated?

- Victim chokes on his or her own vomit.
- Breathing slows, becomes irregular, or stops.
- Heart beats irregularly or stops.
- Hypothermia (low body temperature).
- Hypoglycemia (too little blood sugar) leads to seizures.
- Untreated severe dehydration from vomiting can cause seizures, permanent brain damage, or death.

Even if the victim lives, an alcohol overdose can lead to irreversible brain damage. Rapid binge drinking (which often happens on a bet or a dare) is especially dangerous because the victim can ingest a fatal dose before becoming unconscious.

Don't be afraid to seek medical help for a friend who has had too much to drink. Don't worry that your friend may become angry or embarrassed - remember, you cared enough to help. Always be safe, not sorry.

Sources: National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, Join Together Online

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