

Facts about Alcohol Poisoning

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 asphyxiation or the poisoning of the respiratory center in the brain, both of which can result in brain damage or death.

Common myths about sobering up include drinking black coffee, taking a cold shower, sleeping it off or walking it off. But these are just myths - they don't work. The only thing that reverses the effects of alcohol is time. And, time is something you don't have when a person is suffering from alcohol poisoning.

Do you know about the dangers of alcohol poisoning? Would you know when to seek professional help for a friend? Sadly, many people are unaware of the disabling and sometimes fatal consequences of alcohol poisoning.

Why is Alcohol Poisoning so Dangerous?

Alcohol depresses the involuntary nervous system that controls the body's actions such as breathing and the gag reflex (which prevents choking). A fatal dose of alcohol will eventually cause these functions to cease. It is common for people who have consumed excessive amounts of alcohol to vomit. Without an active gag reflex, a highly intoxicated or unconscious person can choke and die by asphyxiation.

Furthermore, a person's blood alcohol concentration (BAC) will continue to rise after he or she has passed out. Even though the person has stopped drinking, alcohol in the stomach and intestine will continue to enter the bloodstream. This is why it is such a dangerous mistake to assume that the person will be fine by sleeping it off.

Danger 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 You Do if You Suspect Someone Has Alcohol Poisoning?

- Know the danger signs
- But do not wait for all of the signs 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 if Alcohol Poisoning 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 dare or a bet) is especially dangerous because the victim can ingest a fatal dose of alcohol 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.