

Alcohol Poisoning - Signs, Symptoms & Care

Alcohol poisoning is a serious — and sometimes deadly — consequence of drinking large amounts of alcohol in a short period of time. Drinking too much too quickly can affect your breathing, heart rate, body temperature and gag reflex and potentially lead to coma and death.

Alcohol poisoning can also occur when adults or children accidentally or intentionally drink household products that contain alcohol.

A person with alcohol poisoning needs immediate medical attention. If you suspect someone has alcohol poisoning, call for emergency medical help right away.

SYMPTOMS:

Alcohol poisoning signs and symptoms include:

- Confusion;
- Vomiting;
- Seizures;
- Slow breathing (less than eight breaths a minute);
- Irregular breathing (a gap of more than 10 seconds between breaths);
- Blue-tinged skin or pale skin;
- Low body temperature (hypothermia);
- passing out (unconsciousness) and can't be awakened.

It's not necessary to have all these signs and symptoms before you seek help. A person who is unconscious or can't be awakened is at risk of dying.

BINGE DRINKING:

A major cause of alcohol poisoning is binge drinking — a pattern of heavy drinking when a male rapidly consumes five or more alcoholic drinks within two hours, or a female downs at least four drinks within two hours. An alcohol binge can occur over hours or last up to several days.

You can consume a fatal dose before you pass out. Even when you're unconscious or you've stopped drinking, alcohol continues to be released from your stomach and intestines into your bloodstream, and the level of alcohol in your body continues to rise.

HOW MUCH IS TOO MUCH?

Unlike food, which can take hours to digest, alcohol is absorbed quickly by your body — long before most other nutrients. And it takes a lot more time for your body to get rid of the alcohol you've consumed.

Most alcohol is processed by your liver, and in general, it takes about one hour for your liver to process (metabolize) the alcohol in one drink.

One drink is defined as:

- 12 ounces (355 milliliters) of regular beer (about 5 percent alcohol)
- 8 to 9 ounces (237 to 266 milliliters) of malt liquor (about 7 percent alcohol)
- 5 ounces (148 milliliters) of wine (about 12 percent alcohol)
- 1.5 ounces (44 milliliters) of 80-proof hard liquor (about 40 percent alcohol)
- Mixed drinks may contain more than one serving of alcohol and take even longer to metabolize.

RISK FACTORS:

A number of factors can increase your risk of alcohol poisoning, including:

- Your size and weight
- Your overall health
- Whether you've eaten recently - the presence of food in the stomach which can slow down absorption.
- Whether you're combining alcohol with other drugs
- The percentage of alcohol in your drinks
- The rate and amount of alcohol consumption
- Your tolerance level
- Different medications can interfere with alcohol absorption
- The sex or race of the individual

Alcohol depresses the central nervous system, and in the case of overdose, involuntary actions like the gag reflex, and even breathing can slow down or completely stop. There are a number of ways that alcohol poisoning can affect a person, any of which can lead to permanent brain-damage, and even death. A person who has alcohol Poisoning:

- Is in danger of choking to death on her own vomit.
- May develop hypothermia (dangerously low body temperature).
- May develop extremely low blood sugar, which can lead to seizures, brain damage and death.
- May have trouble breathing, or stop breathing altogether.
- May experience irregular heartbeats, or her heart might simply stop.

The Blood Alcohol Content at which alcohol poisoning occurs can differ greatly between individuals, but a blood alcohol content greater than 0.20 (this means that alcohol accounts for twenty per cent of the blood content) means that the individual is at risk. If the level is greater than 0.4 than death is extremely likely. Individuals can die at lower Blood Alcohol levels if they become unconscious and choke on their own vomit.

SYMPTOMS:

Alcohol poisoning signs and symptoms include:

- Confusion - Once the individual reaches this level of intoxication they are highly uncoordinated and unable to make good decisions. This means they are at risk of serious injury due to accidents.
- Agitation and increased aggression
- Seizures
- Dilated pupils

- Incontinence of urine or feces
- Vomiting - The body reacts to the toxic amount of alcohol by vomiting.
- Seizures
- Slow breathing (less than eight breaths a minute) - The high blood alcohol content affects the central nervous system so that physiological functions such as heartbeat and respiratory rate slow down to dangerous levels. The respiratory system can become so suppressed by alcohol that the individual may stop breathing.
- Irregular breathing (a gap of more than 10 seconds between breaths) and heartbeat
- Evidence of Hypoxia including Blue-tinged skin or lips or pale skin
- Low body temperature (hypothermia)
- Clammy skin
- Passing out (unconsciousness) and can't be awakened - Once the blood alcohol content goes above 0.2 the individual becomes increasingly drowsy. They can eventually become unconscious to such an extent that they can't be woken up. A BAC of 0.35 is the equivalent of a general anesthetic.
- Excessive alcohol can interfere with Gluconeogenesis. This means that blood sugar levels can fall to dangerous levels. This is known as hypoglycemia and it can lead to coma.

It's not necessary to have all these signs and symptoms before you seek help. A person who is unconscious or can't be awakened is at risk of dying.

COMPLICATIONS:

Severe complications can result from alcohol poisoning, including:

- Choking.** Alcohol may cause vomiting. Because it depresses your gag reflex, this increases the risk of choking on vomit if you've passed out.
- Stopping breathing.** Accidentally inhaling vomit into your lungs can lead to a dangerous or fatal interruption of breathing (asphyxiation).
- Severe dehydration.** Vomiting can result in severe dehydration, leading to dangerously low blood pressure and fast heart rate.
- Seizures.** Your blood sugar level may drop low enough to cause seizures.
- Hypothermia.** Your body temperature may drop so low that it leads to cardiac arrest.
- Brain damage.** Heavy drinking may cause irreversible brain damage.
- Death.** Any of the issues above can lead to death.

DON'T BE AFRAID TO GET HELP!

It can be difficult to decide if you think someone is drunk enough to warrant medical intervention, but it's best to err on the side of caution. You may worry about the consequences for yourself or your friend or loved one, particularly if you're underage. But the consequences of not getting the right help in time can be far more serious.

WHEN TO SEE A DOCTOR:

If you suspect that someone has alcohol poisoning — even if you don't see the classic signs and symptoms — seek immediate medical care.

WHAT TO DO IF YOU SUSPECT ALCOHOL POISONING:

If you're with someone who has been drinking a lot of alcohol and you see any of the signs or symptoms above, here's what to do:

- ❑ **If you are unsure if someone has passed out**, or simply fallen asleep, try to wake the person. If you can do so, and she responds coherently and seems OK, your friend may have just been sleeping. However, if you can't wake the person, or if she extremely incoherent and/or experiencing any of the above symptoms, proceed with seeking medical treatment.
- ❑ **Call 911** or your local emergency number immediately. Never assume that a person will sleep off alcohol poisoning.
- ❑ **Be prepared to provide information.** If you know, be sure to tell hospital or emergency personnel the kind and amount of alcohol the person drank, and when.
- ❑ **Don't leave an unconscious person alone.** Because alcohol poisoning affects the way your gag reflex works, someone with alcohol poisoning may choke on his or her own vomit and not be able to breathe. While waiting for help, don't try to make the person vomit because he or she could choke.
- ❑ **Help a person who is vomiting.** Try to keep him or her sitting up. If the person must lie down, make sure to turn his or her head to the side — this helps prevent choking. Try to keep the person awake to prevent loss of consciousness.
- ❑ **Don't try to make the person "walk it off"** or put them in a cold shower.
- ❑ **Do not give the person coffee** or anything else to eat or drink.
- ❑ **Don't anger the person by making fun of them** or trying to counsel them about their drinking. This could provoke extreme emotions and cause the person to either try and leave or injure themselves or others.
- ❑ **Lie the person on her side, in the recovery position.** If the victim is unconscious, it's important to ensure that she can breathe, and to protect her from choking if vomiting takes place.[5] •Kneel behind the person, and carefully roll the victim up onto her side, using your body as a support.
 - Bend the person's knees to help support her.
 - Gently tilt the victim's head back and lift her chin to ensure that the airway is open.
 - You must stay with the victim to make sure she remains in the rescue position until help arrives. If there are other people around, you can take turns holding the victim in place.
- ❑ **Never wait just a little longer to call 911** if you think the person could be in serious danger. Chances are the person's condition will worsen over the next few hours, not improve. If you have the slightest doubt, CALL 911.
- ❑ **Know what to expect.** When emergency services arrive, paramedics will assess the situation and stabilize the victim. In most cases, the person will be taken to the emergency room in an ambulance and monitored overnight. At the hospital, the victim will likely be administered IV fluids and hooked up to monitors, and possibly a catheter. The victim's stomach may be pumped, and if needed, she may be fitted with a tube to aid with breathing.[6]

TESTS AND DIAGNOSIS:

In addition to checking for visible signs and symptoms of alcohol poisoning, your doctor will likely order blood and urine tests to check blood alcohol levels and identify other signs of alcohol toxicity, such as low blood sugar.

TREATMENTS & MEDICATIONS:

Alcohol poisoning treatment usually involves supportive care while your body rids itself of the alcohol. This typically includes:

- Careful monitoring
- Prevention of breathing or choking problems
- Oxygen therapy
- Fluids given through a vein (intravenously) to prevent dehydration
- Use of vitamins and glucose to help prevent serious complications of alcohol poisoning
- Adults and children who have accidentally consumed methanol or isopropyl alcohol may need hemodialysis — a mechanical way of filtering waste and toxins from your system — to speed the removal of alcohol from their bloodstream.

MYTHS & HOME REMEDIES:

Home remedies for alcohol poisoning won't work. This is an emergency situation.

Dangerous myths: You can't reverse the effects of alcohol poisoning, and you could actually make things worse through some actions. Here's what doesn't work:

- Black coffee or caffeine — this does not counteract the effects of alcohol poisoning
- A cold shower — the shock of cold can cause a loss of consciousness
- Walking it off — this does not increase the speed alcohol leaves your body
- Sleeping it off — you can lose consciousness while asleep

PREVENTION:

To avoid alcohol poisoning:

- Drink alcohol in moderation, if at all.** If you choose to drink alcohol, do so in moderation. For healthy adults, that means up to one drink a day for women of all ages and men older than age 65, and up to two drinks a day for men age 65 and younger. When you do drink, enjoy your drink slowly.
- Don't drink on an empty stomach.** Having some food in your stomach may slow alcohol absorption somewhat, although it won't prevent alcohol poisoning if, for example, you're binge drinking.
- Drink alcohol at a slow pace.** The best advice is to have a non-alcohol drink in between every alcohol drink. Never drink more than one drink in any one hour period.
- Don't combine alcohol with illegal or prescription drug use.**
- Those people who are on medication** should always ensure that it is permissible for them to drink alcoholic beverages.
- Communicate with your teens.** Talk to your teenagers about the dangers of alcohol, including binge drinking. Evidence suggests that children who are warned about alcohol by their parents and who report close relationships with their parents are less likely to start drinking.
- Store products safely.** If you have small children, store alcohol-containing products, including cosmetics, mouthwashes and medications, out of their reach. Use child-proof bathroom and kitchen cabinets to prevent access to household cleaners, and keep toxic items in your garage or storage area safely out of reach. Consider keeping alcoholic beverages under lock and key.

- **Get follow-up care.** If you or your teen has been treated for alcohol poisoning, be sure to ask about follow-up care. Meeting with a health professional, particularly an experienced chemical dependency professional, can help you prevent future binge drinking.

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