

Women's Health

Counseling Center

Vol. 12 No. 6

DidYouKnow?

Health Center

April 2008

Symptoms of Alcohol Poisoning

The first symptom of alcohol poisoning is nausea, followed by vomiting. These indicate messages from your body that you overindulged. In increasing order of severity, the following lists signs and symptoms of alcohol poisoning.

Nausea Vomiting Mental confusion Unconscious Difficult to awaken Reflexes absent
No withdrawal from painful stimuli (e.g., pinching) Cold, clammy, pale or bluish skin
Slow, Shallow Breathing: Decreased number of breaths or lapses between breaths

In the event of alcohol poisoning, signs and symptoms will most likely be accompanied by a strong odor of alcohol

How many drinks does it take to cause alcohol poisoning?

It's not only how many drinks, but how quickly you drink them, how much you weigh, and whether you are male or female. Multiple factors, including fatigue, how recently you've eaten, and a host of others can also affect individual reactions. The faster you drink, the more quickly your blood alcohol level rises.

The liver metabolizes about a half ounce of pure alcohol per hour, regardless of the amount of food or coffee you consume. A half ounce of alcohol is the amount found in the "standard drink" usually used to calculate blood alcohol. This amount of alcohol is found in the following:

- 1.25 oz of hard liquor (Scotch, vodka, rum, gin) - a single shot, not a double
- 12-oz bottle of domestic beer
- 5.5 oz of table wine (about two-thirds of a cup).

Although people think they "don't get as drunk" on beer or wine as on hard liquor, each of these drinks has the same physiological effect on the body. Each of these contains about the same amount of ethanol, the kind of alcohol that's found in liquor.

The "one drink per hour" rule of thumb won't necessarily keep you below the legal definition of intoxication (in many states .08 percent blood alcohol level, or BAL), but potentially fatal alcohol poisoning generally occurs at substantially higher levels than this.

Alcohol poisoning most often occurs when someone drinks relatively rapidly, often because of a drinking games, drinking contest, 21 shots for a 21st birthday celebration, "forced" drinking of large quantities (at a fraternity initiation, for instance), or "drinking to get drunk."

What to Do When a Friend Drinks too Much

The most difficult aspect of alcohol poisoning is making the decision to do something. Fear of possible legal implications (e.g., for underage drinkers), embarrassment, or not having the information to make a decision can have fatal consequences.

DO...

- ◆ Wake the person up. Call their name, shake them, if they do not respond get help, call the police emergency number (911).
- ◆ Turn the intoxicated person on his/her side and maintain that position by placing a pillow in the small of the person's back while waiting for 911 emergency transport. This is important to prevent aspiration (choking) should the person vomit.
- ◆ Contact a health professional immediately--you cannot afford to guess, if you are having difficulty in determining whether an individual is acutely intoxicated.
- ◆ Stay with the person until medical help arrives.
- ◆ Be sure to tell the ambulance personnel if you believe that other drugs were also ingested. Alcohol in combination with other drugs accounts for about a third of all drug overdose cases in the US.

DO NOT...

- ◆ Let the person "sleep it off." It is important to realize that the person's life may still be in danger.
- ◆ Don't assume that your friend will sleep it off or would prefer not to be disturbed. Even though a person may be semi-conscious, alcohol already in the stomach may continue to enter the bloodstream and circulate throughout the body.
- ◆ Don't take the person home and put them to bed. This may actually place the drinker at risk, because he or she is no longer being observed.