

THE BASICS

Binge Drinking

Do you know?

- Ethyl alcohol (ethanol) is the type of alcohol found in alcoholic drinks. It is a depressant (a drug that slows down your brain functioning). It is produced when fruits, vegetables and grains ferment, or it can be man-made.
- A standard drink is considered to be one 355 ml bottle of beer, which has the same amount of alcohol as one 150 ml glass of wine or approximately 40 ml of spirits, such as whiskey, vodka, rum or scotch.
- The more alcohol in the body, the more intoxicated (drunk) a person is, and the longer it takes for the alcohol to leave the body.
- It takes about one to two hours for an adult liver to break down the alcohol in one standard drink. If a person drinks more than this, the alcohol builds up in the body. For example, if you have two drinks in one hour, it could take the body up to four hours to get rid of all the alcohol. That is why drivers should not drink at all.
- Binge drinking is defined as drinking five or more standard drinks in a row for men and four or more for women.
- Some people may binge drink on rare occasions, while others may binge drink often. Regular binge drinking could be considered heavy or excessive drinking.
- A binge drinking episode may last for a few hours (a Friday night social, for example) or may go on for several days.

A Danger for Binge Drinkers

Binge drinkers can pass out, then throw up. If they are lying on their backs, they could choke on their vomit and die.

Short-term Effects

- At the start of a binge drinking episode, a person may experience:
 - feeling more relaxed and sociable
 - feeling drowsy, dizzy and flushed
 - doing things they would not normally do
- As they continue taking more drinks in one sitting, the person may:
 - have trouble walking or moving
 - have slurred speech and blurred vision
 - have lowered blood pressure, breathing and pulse
 - show aggressive or violent behaviour
- Taking many drinks in a short period can lead to an alcohol overdose or alcohol poisoning. The person may experience:
 - vomiting
 - not being able to remember what they did or said (called a blackout)
 - passing out (becoming unconscious), reflecting a degree of coma
 - cold, clammy skin and shallow breathing
 - death

Immediate medical care is needed if a person shows the signs of an alcohol overdose.

Long-term Effects

After just one episode of binge drinking, possible long term consequences could be:

- permanent brain damage or death from severe dehydration (not enough fluids in the body) from vomiting

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After binge drinking or heavy drinking regularly over a long period of time, a person may experience:

- skin problems and stomach ulcers
- vitamin deficiencies
- sexual problems, such as decreased sperm production, impotency (the inability to have sexual intercourse) and infertility (the inability to have children)
- mood changes and emotional changes
- brain damage and memory loss
- liver damage, heart and circulatory problems, and many types of cancer

Tolerance and Dependence

- Drinkers can become psychologically dependent (they feel they need it) as well as physically dependent (the body needs it) on alcohol.
- Tolerance (a need for more alcohol to get the desired effect) builds up the more a person drinks.

Withdrawal Symptoms

There is a range of withdrawal symptoms:

- Less severe symptoms include hangovers, which are common. Hangovers often include headaches, shakiness, sensitivity to light and sound, nausea and vomiting.
- More severe withdrawal symptoms can occur after long periods of regular, heavy drinking. They include aches, pains, increased blood pressure, rapid pulse and breathing, nausea, vomiting, panic, seizures, hearing and seeing things that aren't there, depression and even death.
 - If these severe withdrawal symptoms are being experienced, consult a medical professional immediately.

Other Risks

- When a person passes out, the BAC (blood alcohol concentration) may keep getting higher, especially if the person drank quickly. Therefore, alcohol poisoning and death could occur, even if the person seems to be breathing normally when he or she first passes out.

- Binge drinking is more harmful to brain cells than any other pattern of drinking.
- People can put themselves in risky situations when drinking (driving while impaired, having unprotected sex, taking unsafe actions which could cause injury).
- Alcohol use during pregnancy can cause permanent damage to the developing fetus. There is no safe amount of alcohol that can be consumed during pregnancy.

REMEMBER: A person's experience with any drug can vary. Here are a few of the many things that may affect the experience: the amount and strength of the drug taken, the setting, a person's mood and expectations before taking the drug, gender, overall health, past experience with that drug and whether more than one drug is being used at the same time. Using alcohol and other drugs at the same time can be dangerous.

Sources and For More Information

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National Institute on Drug Abuse Website: www.nida.nih.gov

Straight Facts about Drugs and Drug Abuse, Health Canada, 2000.

Street Drugs: A Drug Identification Guide, Publishers Group, LLC, Plymouth, MN, 2005.

For more information or for help with a drug or alcohol problem:
Contact your local Addictions Foundation of Manitoba (AFM) office or visit the website at www.afm.mb.ca. AFM offers a broad range of prevention and rehabilitation services, including harm reduction and abstinence-based programs for alcohol, other drugs and gambling.

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