

Alcohol Poisoning

A Library and Resource Center on Alcohol, Tobacco, Other Drugs, Mental Health and Wellness

Mechanisms of alcohol poisoning

Alcohol depresses nerves that control involuntary actions such as breathing, the heart beat, and the gag reflex (prevents choking). A fatal dose of alcohol will eventually stop these functions. After the victim stops drinking, the heart keeps beating, and alcohol in the stomach continues to enter the bloodstream and circulate throughout the body.

As a result, the following can happen:

- Victim chokes on own vomit
- Breathing slows, becomes irregular, stops
- Heart beats irregularly or stops
- Hypothermia (low body temperature) leads to cardiac arrest
- Hypoglycemia (too little blood sugar) leads to seizures



Even if the victim lives, 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.

Critical signs for alcohol poisoning:

- Mental confusion, stupor, coma, or person cannot be roused
- No response to pinching the skin
- Vomiting while sleeping
- Seizures
- Slow breathing (less than 8 breaths per minute)
- Irregular breathing (10 seconds or more between breaths)
- Hypothermia (low body temperature), bluish skin color, paleness

Many people try different methods to reverse the effects of alcohol to become sober. Most of these methods are myths, and **they don't work.**

Some common myths:

- Drinking black coffee
- Taking a cold bath or shower
- Sleeping it off
- Walking it off

If you suspect that someone may have ingested a fatal dose of alcohol, help is required immediately:

- ✓ Call 911 or the emergency medical number.
- ✓ Stay with the victim.
- ✓ Keep the victim from choking on vomit.
- ✓ Tell emergency medical technicians the symptoms and, if you know, how much alcohol the victim drank. Prompt action may save the life of a friend, or your own.



(continued)

When medical personnel arrive, they should:

- Protect the airway. This usually means inserting a tube into the trachea to protect it from vomit. Turning the victim on his/her side is not sufficient protection.
- Administer oxygen.
- Monitor breathing, and place victim on respirator if necessary.
- Monitor glucose and other levels in blood.
- Administer medication if convulsions are present.

Some conventional treatments do not work for alcohol overdose:

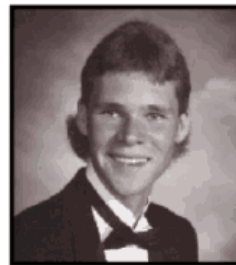
- Pumping the stomach
- Syrup of Ipecac to induce vomiting
- Activated charcoal
- Narcan (to reverse the effects of the central nervous system depressant)

Bystanders (friends, parents, strangers) have a responsibility:

- Know the danger signals (see “Critical Signs” section).
- 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 or the emergency number for help. Don't try to guess the level of drunkenness.

What you can do – A call to action

- Write letters to your local editor using this information the next time you notice a news story about an underage drinking incident or underage impaired driving crash.
- Encourage your school principal to present programs on alcohol awareness in health classes.
- Refuse to host underage drinking parties.



Teens pictured in this piece died from alcohol poisoning

Information Provided by:
National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA)
www.nhtsa.dot.gov