



UNITED
BEHAVIORAL HEALTH

Wellness Monthly

Healthy matters to keep in mind.

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None for the Road

Effects of Alcohol on the Body

Consistent use of low levels of alcohol does not cause long term health problems, and it's possible to overuse alcohol from time to time without causing permanent damage.

But short term overuse in excessive amounts—binge drinking—can cause harm, or even death. And even in small amounts, alcohol can affect your behavior and motor skills.

So how much is too much? There are rough guidelines to follow. Three or more drinks a day may be a sign of a problem with alcohol, as may regular or weekend bingeing. Alcohol

affects people differently, based on size and weight and other factors. All 50 states have adopted legal limits, but it's impossible to accurately predict how many drinks it will take an individual to reach that level.

The best choice is to err on the side of safety. If you plan on drinking, designate a driver who does not. If you've had any drinks at all, find another ride home.

Effects of Alcohol

The long term effects of alcohol on the body take several forms. In some cases, alcohol directly damages your body's organs or systems. In others, side effects of alcohol abuse such as a neglected diet can lead to deficiencies that cause damage.

Many of the most serious effects can be found in the liver. If you're generally healthy, alcohol taken infrequently or in moderate amounts can damage liver tissue but the liver has time to repair itself. When large amounts of alcohol are frequently in the blood, the liver can't function properly — this is called cirrhosis of the liver, and it's just one of the diseases alcohol abuse can lead to.

Your brain, your stomach, your heart, even your reproductive organs and your skin can be damaged by too much alcohol. Here's a summary of what can happen to your body when you drink too much alcohol.

Brain. Years of steady drinking changes your brain permanently.

Alcohol and Driving

Another way in which alcohol causes injuries or death is when people who have been drinking get behind the wheel of a car. Impairment due to alcohol use begins to occur at levels well below the legal limit, which all U.S. states have adopted as 0.08 percent for drivers aged 21 years or older. According to the National Center for Injury Prevention and Control:

- Alcohol-related motor vehicle crashes kill someone every 31 minutes and injure someone every two minutes.
- During 2005, 16,885 people in the U.S. died in alcohol-related motor vehicle crashes.
- In 2005, nearly 1.4 million drivers were arrested for driving under the influence of alcohol or narcotics.
- More than half of the 414 child passengers ages 14 and younger who died in alcohol-related crashes during 2005 were riding with the drinking driver.
- In 2005, 48 children age 14 years and younger who were killed as pedestrians or cyclists were struck by impaired drivers.

Upcoming Articles

May 2007
Keeping Kids Safe

June 2007
Depression in Men

Continued on pg. 2 >>

>> continued from pg. 1

Alcohol kills brain tissue and increases the size of ventricles. It also deprives it of the vitamins it needs to function properly, including the important B vitamin thiamine.

Alcohol can cause impaired behavior, judgment, memory, concentration, and coordination. It acts as a sedative on the Central Nervous System, depressing the nerve cells in the brain. It also causes impaired visual ability and fine motor skills, slows reaction times, and can dull the senses.

Heart. Alcohol can cause vitamin deficiencies that weaken the heart's ability to pump, which can lead to heart failure. It can increase blood pressure, which in turn raises the risk of heart attack and stroke. Alcohol also inhibits the production of blood cells.

Stomach. Steady alcohol intake can lead to regular irritation of the stomach, as well as sickness and pain. But even just one occasion of drinking heavily will cause the same. Over time, this can lead to peptic ulcers,

inflammation, bleeding lesions, and cancer.

Skin. Alcohol causes small blood vessels in the skin to widen. More blood flows close to the skin's surface. This can cause skin to appear flush in color, and to feel warm.

Intestines. Alcohol can irritate the intestinal lining and the colon, leading over time to inflammation, ulcers, and cancer. It impairs the intestine's ability to process vitamins and nutrients.

Bones. Alcohol prevents the body from properly absorbing calcium, leading to increased risk of osteoporosis — weak, soft, brittle, thin bones.

Reproductive Organs. Alcohol depresses nerve impulses, which for men can mean an inability to get or maintain erections. Sexual functioning can be impaired, resulting in impotence and infertility. Women also have a high risk of developing breast cancer.

For more information on alcohol and substance abuse, visit www.liveandworkwell.com.



Common Myths of Alcohol and Drinking

Certain myths about the practice and effects of drinking alcohol have come to be part of mainstream acceptance. This doesn't mean that they're true, only that they're frequently repeated. Many are used as excuses or justifications for negative behavior. Each of the following myths is dispelled below:

Alcohol gives you energy.

In fact, alcohol is a depressant that slows your ability to think, speak and move.

Everybody reacts the same to alcohol.

Dozens of factors affect reactions to alcohol, including body weight and chemistry, time of day, mood, and more.

A cold shower or a cup of coffee will sober someone up.

The body metabolizes alcohol at the rate of approximately one drink per hour. Nothing sobers you up but time.

Beer is not as intoxicating as hard liquor.

The same amount of alcohol is in a twelve ounce bottle of beer and a shot of hard liquor. While these beverages can sometimes affect individuals in different ways, they are equally intoxicating.

Light drinking doesn't affect driving ability.

Alcohol slows down reaction time and affects judgment, even in small amounts.

Only a certain type of person becomes alcoholics.

Alcoholism affects people of all ages, social, and economic backgrounds.

Drinking is not as harmful as using illegal drugs.

Alcohol is legal and more socially acceptable than illegal drugs, but is still classified as a drug. It can be abused, and is one of the most abused drugs in society. Like other drugs, alcohol can be physically and psychologically addictive.

Eating before drinking will keep a person from getting drunk.

Eating before and while drinking slows down the body's absorption of alcohol, but there is no magical way to keep alcohol out of the bloodstream.

Resources

United Behavioral Health

Ask your HR representative for your access code and toll-free number.
www.liveandworkwell.com

Visit the Alcohol Abuse Mental Health Condition Center (the link is on the home page) for additional information and resources regarding alcohol.

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