

Alcohol Overdose



Critical Signs and Symptoms of an Alcohol Overdose:

- Mental confusion, stupor
- Difficulty remaining conscious
- Vomiting
- Seizures
- Slow breathing (fewer than 8 breaths per minute); Irregular breathing (10 seconds or more between breaths)
- Slow heart rate
- Extremely low body temperature
- Clammy skin, bluish skin color or paleness
- Dulled responses, such as no gag reflex (which prevents choking)

What Is An Alcohol Overdose?

Drinking too much and too quickly can lead to significant impairments in motor coordination, decision-making, impulse control, and other functions. Continuing to drink despite clear signs of significant impairment can result in an alcohol overdose. An alcohol overdose occurs when there is so much alcohol in the bloodstream, that areas of the brain controlling basic life-support functions such as breathing, heart rate and temperature control, begin to shut down. Symptoms of alcohol overdose include mental confusion, difficulty remaining conscious, vomiting, seizures, trouble breathing, slow heart rate, clammy skin, dulled responses such as no gag reflex, and extremely low body temperature. Alcohol overdose can lead to permanent brain damage or death.

Who May Be At Risk?

Anyone who consumes too much alcohol too quickly may be in danger of an alcohol overdose. This is especially true of individuals who engage in binge drinking and extreme binge drinking (also known as high-intensity drinking). Binge drinking is defined as a pattern of drinking that brings blood alcohol concentration (BAC) to .08 percent or higher, typically occurring after a woman consumes 4 drinks, or a man consumes 5 drinks in about 2 hours. Extreme binge drinking is defined as two or more times the binge-drinking thresholds for women and men.

Teenagers and young adults who drink may be at particular risk for alcohol overdose. Research shows that teens and college-age young adults often engage in binge drinking and high intensity drinking. Drinking such large quantities can overwhelm the body's ability to break down and clear alcohol from the bloodstream. This leads to rapid increases in BAC and significantly impairs brain and other bodily functions.

What's The Difference Between Impairment And Overdose That Puts One's Life In Jeopardy?

Age, sensitivity to alcohol (tolerance), gender, speed of drinking, medications taken, and the amount of food eaten can all be factors.

Alcohol use and taking opioids or sedative-hypnotics, such as sleep and anti-anxiety medications, can increase risk of an overdose. Examples of these medications include sleep aids such as zolpidem (Ambien) and eszopiclone (Lunesta), and benzodiazepines such as diazepam (Valium) and alprazolam (Xanax). Even drinking alcohol while taking over-the-counter antihistamines can be dangerous. Using alcohol with opioid pain relievers such as oxycodone and morphine or illicit opioids such as heroin is also a very dangerous combination. Like alcohol, these drugs suppress areas in the brain that control vital functions such as breathing. Ingesting alcohol and other drugs together intensifies their individual effects and could produce an overdose with even moderate amounts of alcohol.



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As BAC Increases, So Do The Risks

Even small increases in Blood Alcohol Concentration (BAC) can decrease motor coordination, make a person feel sick, and cloud judgment. This can increase an individual's risk of being injured from falls or car crashes, experiencing acts of violence, and engaging in unprotected or unintended sex. When BAC reaches high levels, amnesia (blackouts), loss of consciousness (passing out), and death can occur. BAC can continue to rise even when a person stops drinking or is unconscious. Alcohol in the stomach and intestine continues to enter the bloodstream and circulate throughout the body. It is dangerous to assume that an unconscious person will be fine by sleeping it off. One potential danger of alcohol overdose is choking on one's own vomit. Alcohol at very high levels can hinder signals in the brain that control automatic responses such as the gag reflex. With no gag reflex, a person who drinks to the point of passing out is in danger of choking on his or her vomit and dying from a lack of oxygen (i.e., asphyxiation). Even if the person survives, an alcohol overdose like this can lead to long-lasting brain damage.

Know The Danger Signs And Act Quickly

Know the danger signals and, if you suspect that someone has an alcohol overdose, call 911 for help immediately. Do not wait for the person to have all the symptoms, and be aware that a person who has passed out can die. Don't play doctor—cold showers, hot coffee, and walking do not reverse the effects of alcohol overdose and could actually make things worse

While waiting for medical help to arrive:

- Be prepared to provide information to the responders, including the type and amount of alcohol the person drank; other drugs he or she took, if known; and any health information that you know about the person, such as medications currently taking, allergies to medications, and any existing health conditions.
- Do not leave an intoxicated person alone, as he or she is at risk of getting injured from falling or choking. Keep the person on the ground in a sitting or partially upright position rather than in a chair.
- Help a person who is vomiting. Have him or her lean forward to prevent choking. If a person is unconscious or lying down, roll him or her onto one side with an ear toward the ground to prevent choking.

Stay alert to keep your friends and family safe. And remember—you can avoid the risk of an alcohol overdose by drinking responsibly if you choose to drink, or by not drinking at all.

Connecticut Resources

Department of Mental Health
and Addiction Services
www.ct.gov/dmhas
24/7 Access Line
1-800-563-4086

National Resources

Substance Abuse and Mental
Health Services Administration
www.Samhsa.gov
1-800-662-HELP(4357)

National Institute on
Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism
www.niaaa.nih.gov/

