



# Facts About Alcohol Poisoning

Excessive drinking can be hazardous to everyone's health. It can be particularly stressful if you are the sober one taking care of your drunk roommate, who is vomiting while you are trying to study for an exam.

Some people laugh at the behavior of others who are drunk. Some think it's even funnier when they pass out, but there is nothing funny about the aspiration of vomit leading to asphyxiation or the poisoning of the respiratory center in the brain. Both can result in death.

Do you know about the dangers of alcohol poisoning? When should you seek professional help for a friend? Sadly enough, too many college students say they wish they would have sought medical treatment for a friend. Many end up feeling responsible for alcohol-related tragedies that could have easily been prevented.

Common myths about sobering up include drinking black coffee, taking a cold bath or shower, sleeping it off, or walking it off, but these are just myths, and they don't work. The only thing that reverses the effects of alcohol is time - something you may not have if you are suffering from alcohol poisoning. Many different factors affect the level of intoxication of an individual, so it's difficult to gauge exactly how much is too much.

## What Happens to Your Body When You Get Alcohol Poisoning?

Alcohol depresses nerves that control involuntary actions such as breathing and the gag reflex (which prevents choking). A fatal dose of alcohol will eventually stop these functions.

It is common for someone who drank excessive alcohol to vomit since alcohol is an irritant to the stomach. There is then the danger of choking on vomit, which could cause death by asphyxiation in a person who is not conscious because of intoxication.

You should also know that a person's blood alcohol concentration (BAC) can continue to rise even while he or she is passed out. Even after a person stops drinking, alcohol in the stomach and intestine continues to enter the bloodstream and circulate throughout the body. It is dangerous to assume the person will be fine by sleeping it off.

## Critical Signs for Alcohol Poisoning

- Mental confusion, stupor, coma, or person cannot be roused
- Vomiting
- Seizures
- Slow breathing (fewer than eight breaths per minute)
- Irregular breathing (10 seconds or more between breaths)
- Hypothermia (low body temperature), bluish skin color, paleness



## What Should I Do If I Suspect Someone Has Alcohol Poisoning?

- Know the danger signals
- 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 for help**. Don't try to guess the level of drunkenness.



## What Can Happen to Someone With Alcohol Poisoning That Goes Untreated?

- Victim chokes on his or her own vomit
- Breathing slows, becomes irregular, or stops
- Heart beats irregularly or stops
- Hypothermia (low body temperature)
- Hypoglycemia (too little blood sugar) leads to seizures
- Untreated severe dehydration from vomiting can cause seizures, permanent brain damage, or death

Even if the victim lives, an 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.

- Don't be afraid to seek medical help for a friend who has had too much to drink.
- Don't worry that your friend may become angry or embarrassed. Remember, you cared enough to help.

*Always Be Safe  
Not Sorry*

National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA)  
[www.collegedrinkingprevention.gov/OtherAlcoholInformation/factsAboutAlcoholPoisoning.aspx](http://www.collegedrinkingprevention.gov/OtherAlcoholInformation/factsAboutAlcoholPoisoning.aspx)  
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