

The Dangers of Binge Drinking

Too many young people are participating in a dangerous practice called binge drinking, or drinking to intoxication. It's defined as having five or more drinks in a row for men, for women it's 4-plus drinks in a row.

According to a survey conducted by the Department of Education, 44 percent of U.S. college students are binge drinkers.

"For these students, intoxication is the main goal. And with intoxication may come many other dangers, including dizziness, loss of coordination, diarrhea, vomiting, lack of judgment, or even alcohol poisoning," says Don Timm II, M.D., an emergency-department physician at RHD Memorial Medical Center in Dallas.

According to the Centers For Disease Control, binge drinking is associated with unintentional injuries such as motor vehicle crashes, falls, burns, drownings, and hypothermia. Homicide, suicide, child abuse, domestic violence, sudden infant death syndrome, hypertension, heart attack, gastritis, pancreatitis, sexually transmitted diseases, meningitis, and poor control of diabetes are also consequences of binge drinking.

Alcohol poisoning can be a fatal result of binge drinking. Alcohol's effects on the central nervous system include slowing breathing and heart rate and impairment of the gag reflex, which increases the risk of choking on vomit, if the drinker passes out from excess drinking. Blood alcohol levels can continue to rise even if a person has passed out. Be concerned about alcohol poisoning if a person who has been drinking heavily is confused, vomits, has a seizure, pale skin or becomes unconscious.

Other dangers of binge drinking are alcohol abuse and alcoholism.

Alcoholism is a disease often characterized by the following elements:

- Craving: a strong need, or compulsion, to drink.
- Loss of control: the frequent inability to stop drinking once a person has begun to do so.
- Physical dependence: the occurrence of withdrawal symptoms, such as nausea, sweating, shakiness and anxiety, when alcohol use is stopped after a period of heavy drinking.
- Tolerance: the need for increasing amounts of alcohol to get high.

"It's all about an uncontrollable need for alcohol," says Dr. Timm. "Most alcoholics don't have the willpower to stop drinking and need outside assistance to recover from their disease."

Recent research has demonstrated that many people may inherit a vulnerability to alcoholism. Environmental factors, such as peers and availability, also are significant influences.

Alcohol abuse differs from alcoholism in that it doesn't include an extremely strong craving for alcohol, loss of control or physical dependence.

Instead, alcohol abuse is defined as a pattern of drinking that may be accompanied by one or more of the following problems:

- Failure to fulfill major work, school or home responsibilities.
- Drinking in situations that are physically dangerous, such as while driving a car or operating machinery.
- Recurring alcohol-related legal problems, such as being arrested for driving under the influence or for physically hurting someone while drunk.
- Continued drinking despite having ongoing relationship problems caused or worsened by alcohol.

"Many recovering alcoholics will tell you drinking isn't worth it," says Dr. Timm. "The high of binge drinking now can lead to a more dangerous, unhealthy path in the future. It can even be lethal."

Remember that Southwest EAP is here to help you and your household. If you or a loved one is experiencing problems with substances please feel free to reach out and see how Southwest EAP can help. Contact us confidentially anytime.