

# Acute alcohol poisoning

**Alcohol is a poison and too much of it can kill you.**

**Acute alcohol poisoning is usually a result of binge drinking. Your body can process about one unit of alcohol an hour. If you drink a lot in a short space of time, the amount of alcohol in your bloodstream (blood alcohol concentration or BAC) may become dangerously high.**

**This can stop your body from working properly. In extreme cases, you could stop breathing, your heart could stop beating or you could choke on your own vomit.**

**Many of the traditional 'cures' for alcohol poisoning – giving someone black coffee, making them sick, leaving them to sleep it off – can do more harm than good. By recognising the signs of alcohol poisoning and knowing how to respond, you could save someone's life.**

## FACTS and FIGURES

- Alcohol is a depressant, which means it slows down your brain's functions. You might lose your inhibitions and your sense of balance. But it also affects the nerves that control your heartbeat, breathing and gag reflex (which is what stops you choking).
- Alcohol irritates the stomach, which causes vomiting – dangerous if somebody's gag reflex isn't working properly. People die from choking or accidentally inhaling vomit into their lungs.
- Someone's BAC continues to rise even after they've stopped drinking, as alcohol in the digestive system will continue to be absorbed into the bloodstream. This means you should never leave someone to 'sleep it off', as their condition could still be getting worse.
- There is no minimum dose for acute alcohol poisoning to take effect – it depends on your age, sex, size, weight, how fast you've been drinking, how much you've eaten, your general health, other drugs you might have taken...
- More than 30,000 people were admitted to hospital with alcohol poisoning in England in 2007-08 (13,400 men and 16,700 women) – that's more than 500 every week.<sup>(1)</sup>
- 157 people died from accidental alcohol poisoning in England in 2007.<sup>(2)</sup>

## PROGRESSION

Be alert for signs that somebody has progressed from being stupidly drunk to dangerously intoxicated:

- Confusion
- Loss of coordination
- Vomiting
- Seizures
- Irregular or slow breathing (less than eight breaths a minute)
- Blue-tinged or pale skin
- Low body temperature (hypothermia)
- Stupor (being conscious but unresponsive)
- Unconsciousness (passing out)

In the worst cases, alcohol poisoning can lead to comas, brain damage and even death. After an alcohol overdose, you could:

- Choke on your vomit
- Stop breathing
- Have a heart attack
- Inhale vomit, leading to fatal lung damage
- Experience severe dehydration, which can cause permanent brain damage in extreme cases
- Get hypothermia
- Suffer seizures because of lowered blood sugar levels.

## ADVICE and GETTING HELP

Someone who's suffering from acute alcohol poisoning will be in no state to help themselves, so it's important to look out for your friends.

What to do if someone is showing signs of alcohol poisoning:

### DO:

- Try to keep them sitting up and awake
- Give them water if they're able to drink it
- Lie them on their side in the recovery position if they've passed out. Check they're breathing properly
- Keep them warm
- Stay with them and monitor their symptoms.

### DON'T:

- Give them coffee – it will make them more dehydrated
- Leave them alone, even if they're asleep, or leave them lying on their back
- Walk them around
- Put them under a cold shower
- Let them drink any more alcohol.

**DON'T** wait for all the symptoms to be present before getting help.

**DO DIAL 999** to call an ambulance if you're in any doubt.

## Hospital treatments for acute alcohol poisoning

Every weekend, hundreds of people are taken into hospital with acute alcohol poisoning. In less severe cases, the medical staff will monitor them closely until they're in a fit state to be taken home. This may involve an overnight stay.

In more severe cases, the medical staff may:

- Insert a tube into their trachea to help them breathe
- Fit an intravenous drip to top-up the body's water, blood sugar and vitamin levels
- Fit a catheter (a tube that goes up the urethra, so the bladder empties straight into a bag)
- Pump the stomach by flushing fluids through a tube inserted into the nose or mouth.

### References

- 1 Numbers of admissions coded T51 NHS Information Centre, *Statistics on Alcohol: England, 2009*.
- 2 Deaths coded X45 NHS Information Centre, *Statistics on Alcohol: England, 2009*.

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