

A safe New Year's: Getting drunk, sick can happen before you know it



By Armando L. Sanchez / GateHouse News Service

Overeating isn't the only thing you should look out for this holiday season. If you get arrested for driving under the influence while celebrating this season, you could spend the rest of the New Year in jail.

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Many people look forward to ringing in the New Year with a few rounds of beer, friends and lighthearted laughs.

But some adults hit their alcohol limit long before the countdown, confetti and midnight cheers as good times only seem to get better with each beer, shot or glass of wine.

Valerie Scarborough, alcohol and drug prevention coordinator at the University of Illinois Springfield, says good times can quickly become bad memories when peer pressure and a lack of restraint lead to dangerous dares at the bar counter.

Don't let foolish behavior crash your celebrations this week. Here's what you need to know to keep your New Year happy and safe.

What is binge drinking?

Kidshealth.org defines binge drinking as consuming large quantities of alcoholic beverages in a single drinking session.

For men, consuming five or more drinks in a row is considered binge drinking. For women, consuming four or more drinks in a row is considered binge drinking, Scarborough says.

"There is no set time limit in which the drinks must be consumed, but drinking more than one drink over the course of an hour can be dangerous," she says.

Friendships can play a vital role in how little or how much a person drinks.

"People tend to binge drink -- or drink excessively -- when they're enjoying their peers," Scarborough says. "When drinking games and dares lead to binge drinking, things can get out of hand very quickly."

Add it up

Many people don't realize just how quickly a few drinks can accumulate.

Here's how it all adds up. Scarborough says one drink equals one of the following:

- One 10-12-ounce beer.
- One 5-ounce glass of wine.
- One shot of liquor.

"All are considered equivalent in the sense that they contain the same amount of ethanol," says Dr. Ron W. Kanwischer, an assistant professor of psychiatry at Southern Illinois University School of Medicine. "Ethanol can be extremely toxic when taken in large doses."

One drink for a 150-pound individual can create a blood-alcohol concentration (BAC) of .05. Two drinks for a person of equal weight creates a .1 BAC.

Alcohol as poison

And if you consume a lot of alcohol in a short amount of time, that could raise your BAC to .4 to .5 -- what Kanwischer calls "a lethal dose."

One of the most detrimental risks associated with binge drinking is alcohol poisoning.

According to www.CollegeDrinkingPrevention.gov, alcohol poisoning can affect a person's gag reflex, leading to the aspiration of vomit and eventual asphyxiation if he or she has passed out from intoxication.

Poisoning can also cause mental confusion, stupor, coma or the inability to rouse an unconscious individual.

Slow breathing (fewer than eight breaths per minute) and irregular breathing (10 seconds or more between breaths) can result, along with hypothermia, as body temperature decreases. Seizures may result from hypoglycemia, or too little blood sugar.

The most dangerous side effect is the potential for poisoning of the respiratory center in the brain, which can result in coma or death.

"Alcohol poisoning should be taken very seriously," Kanwischer says. "Even after a person stops drinking, the alcohol in the stomach and the intestine continues to enter the bloodstream and circulate throughout the body."

Who's susceptible?

New Year's Eve often attracts people who ordinarily don't drink much. However, Kanwischer says alcohol poisoning is much more common with those who are not used to drinking because their bodies have a low tolerance level for alcohol.

Age is another factor.

"If I was a young person between the ages of 18 to 24 years and I was playing beer pong or taking shots with friends, I could overdose very quickly," he says. "Alcohol doesn't metabolize as quickly in young people as in those who are older."

Another factor is stomach content. So eat something; Kanwischer says a full stomach slows down the body's absorption of alcohol.

What can you do?

Planning to drink in moderation or avoiding alcohol altogether is the best way to stay safe and healthy this New Year's Eve.

"I like to give my students tips for taking it slow when drinking, especially on New Year's Eve," Scarborough says. "I tell my students who are of age to limit their drinking to one or two drinks per hour and to also make sure they have eaten a good meal prior to going out with friends."

Kanwischer suggests paying special attention to the amount of alcohol in a beverage.

"Beer contains eleven ounces of liquid other than alcohol," he says, "so the ethanol content is not as high as in hard liquor."

When danger strikes

Knowing what to do when encountering someone with alcohol poisoning can be extremely helpful in a crisis.

"A lot of people think they need to call 911 right away," says Kanwischer. "But the first thing a person should do is to turn his friend on his stomach or on his side. This prevents the victim from choking on his or her own vomit."

"Call 911 if a person cannot be roused, if a person cannot be kept awake or if a person is turning blue and could possibly choke to death."

For more information on the risks of binge drinking and alcohol poisoning, visit www.collegedrinkingprevention.gov or Kidshealth.org.

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