

Police: Alcohol

You have a drinking problem

. . . if

- ..you are unable to control your drinking and wind up drunk.
- ..you are using alcohol to escape your problems.
- ..you change from your usual reserved character into the "life of the party".
- ..your personality changes from Dr. Jekyll to Mr. Hyde.
- ..you can drink everybody under the table.
- ..you don't remember what happened when you were drinking.
- ..you have problems at work or in school as a result of drinking.
- ..your friends and family are concerned about your drinking.

Binge Drinking

Binge drinking is defined as "the consumption of five or more drinks in a row on at least one occasion." In national surveys about a third of high school seniors and 42 percent of college students reported at least one occasion of binge drinking within the previous 2 weeks.

While national surveys have documented a significant decline in the use of other drugs by high school seniors and college-age youths, there have been only modest declines in the numbers reporting binge drinking. Teenagers and young adults drink alcoholic beverages at about the same rates they did 5 years ago. Binge drinking increases the risk for alcohol-related injury, especially for young people, who often combine alcohol with other high risk activities, such as impaired driving. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the four leading injury-related causes of death among youths under the age of 20 are motor vehicle crashes, homicides, suicides, and drowning. Alcohol is involved in many of these deaths.

Sexual encounters with their inherent risks of pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases, and HIV exposure, as well as date rape and

other violence, can and do occur more frequently while students are consuming large amounts of alcohol by binge drinking.

Binge drinking, or the partying lifestyle of young people, may be related to an environment that appears to support heavy drinking. Youths report that alcohol is more easily available to them today than it was 5 years ago, and there is a high correlation between availability and use. In addition, alcoholic beverages remain inexpensive in comparison with other beverages, especially beer when purchased in kegs, often the center of a party.

As young people enter the culture of the college campus, they are confronted with many challenges and opportunities: the opportunity to be independent of parental control; the need to conform; and the insecurity of a new social setting. Forty-one percent of college students engage in binge drinking, as compared to 34 percent of their non-college counterparts.

Another factor that may add to the college setting as a high-risk environment for binge drinking is that youths on college campuses are targets of heavy marketing of alcoholic beverages. Beer companies are especially active in promoting to college students. Student newspapers and campus bulletin boards boast ads for happy hours with price reductions and other incentives that promote heavy drinking. Representatives of the alcohol industry, including producers, wholesalers, and retailers, sponsor campus social, sporting, and cultural events, even on campuses where the majority of participants are under the age of 21.

Prevention strategies in response to binge drinking by young people include actions to reduce alcohol availability, such as increases in price, and responsible beverage service practices, especially at parties. Some communities require keg tagging, which requires kegs to be labeled with a serial number identifying the purchaser in case the keg is discovered at an underage drinking party. Other strategies include restrictions on marketing and promotion practices that glamorize heavy drinking, especially those directed at young people.

Blood Alcohol Concentration

Blood alcohol concentration (BAC) is the amount of alcohol in the bloodstream. It is measured in percentages. For instance, having a BAC of 0.10 percent means that a person has 1 part alcohol per 1,000 parts blood in the body.

In a review of studies of alcohol-related crashes, reaction time, tracking ability, concentrated attention ability, divided attention performance, information process capability, visual functions, perceptions, and psycho-motor performance, impairment in all these areas was significant at blood alcohol concentrations of 0.05 percent. Impairment first appeared in many of these important areas of performance at blood alcohol concentrations of 0.02 percent, substantially below the legal standard in most States for drunkenness, which is 0.10 percent.

Approximately half of traffic injuries involve alcohol. About one-third of fatally injured passengers and pedestrians have elevated blood alcohol levels. For fatal intentional injuries, half of homicides involve alcohol, as do one-quarter to one-third of suicides.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) estimate that about 30,000 unintentional injury deaths per year are directly attributable to alcohol. Another 15,000 to 20,000 homicides or suicides per year are associated with alcohol.

For non-fatal unintentional injuries many studies show that 25 to 50 percent involve alcohol. The same rates are found for a wide range of non-fatal intentional injuries involving alcohol, including assaults, spouse abuse, child molestation, sexual assault, rape, and attempted suicide.

BAC can be measured by breath, blood, or urine tests. BAC measurement is especially important for determining the role of alcohol in crashes, falls, fires, crime, family violence, suicide, and other forms of intentional and unintentional injury. Information on BAC:

provides a baseline for evaluating prevention and intervention programs;
supplies data needed for planning and providing direct services; and
improves estimates of the economic costs of alcohol use.

One problem in obtaining accurate BAC data is a lack of testing in hospital emergency rooms. Research indicates that emergency rooms do not test routinely for alcohol in crash victims. A national survey of trauma centers found that although two-thirds of the centers estimated that the majority of patients had consumed alcohol, only 55 percent routinely conducted BAC tests at patient admissions. A review

of emergency room studies indicated that up to one-third of patients admitted to emergency rooms are not tested.

BAC and Impaired Driving

The public most commonly associates BAC with drunk driving. However, it is more accurate to refer to alcohol-impaired driving because one does not have to be drunk (intoxicated) to be demonstrably impaired. Driving skills, especially judgment, are impaired in most people long before they exhibit visible signs of drunkenness. While most States define legal intoxication for purposes of driving at a BAC of 0.10 percent or higher, alcohol may cause deterioration in driving skills at 0.05 percent or even lower. Deterioration progresses rapidly with rising BAC.

In recognition of impairment at lower BAC levels, the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) refers to traffic crashes as "alcohol involved" or "alcohol related" when a participant (driver, pedestrian, or bicyclist) has a measured or estimated BAC of 0.01 or above. NHTSA defines a "high-level alcohol crash" as one where an active participant has a BAC of 0.10 or higher. Healthy People 2000: National Health Promotion and Disease Prevention Objectives calls for all 50 States to lower legal blood alcohol concentration tolerance levels to 0.04 percent for motor vehicle drivers age 21 and older and .00 percent for those younger than 21. Other ways to lower the BAC levels of drivers include:

Using planning and zoning ordinances to control the type and number of outlets selling alcohol, as well as the particular hours of the day alcoholic beverages are available for sale;

Raising the priority of law officers' programs designed to deter drinking and driving, including sobriety checkpoints;

Implementing programs to promote responsible alcoholic beverage service in both commercial and social settings;

Organizing comprehensive, community-based awareness programs, including mass media promotion, to counter the adverse consequences of alcohol use in high risk situations, including driving;

Making the enforcement of underage sales and drinking laws a priority.