

Alcohol Poisoning: Effects/Risks, Signs, & Response

Effects/Risks of 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's common for excessive alcohol to cause vomiting since alcohol is an irritant to the stomach. A person's **blood alcohol concentration (BAC)** can also continue to rise even while he or she is passed out. Alcohol in the stomach and intestine continues to enter the bloodstream and circulate throughout the body, even if the individual has stopped drinking. It is dangerous to assume the person will be fine by sleeping it off. Other effects/risks of alcohol poisoning are:

- Victim chokes on his or her own vomit (especially dangerous if individual is unconscious)
- 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, dare, or during a drinking game) is especially dangerous because the victim can ingest a fatal dose of alcohol before becoming unconscious.

Signs of Alcohol Poisoning (Conscious Individual)

- Individual slurs speech and/or can't form clear sentences
- Individual can't walk on their own
- Vomiting
- Mental confusion (don't know where they are, can't remember what day it is, or can't articulate other factual information)

Signs of Alcohol Poisoning (Unconscious Individual)

- Individual can't be woken up (yelling or shaking)
- Vomiting
- Seizures
- Slow breathing (less than eight breaths per minute)
- Irregular breathing (10 seconds or more between breaths)
- Low body temperature (hypothermia)
- Bluish colored skin, paleness

*It's not necessary for all of these symptoms to be present before you seek help. A person who is unconscious or can't be roused is at risk of dying.

Response (Conscious Individual)

- Find out how much the individual had to drink (from them, friends, or roommates)
- Get individual to a safe place
- Get roommate or friend to monitor individual's condition, or monitor their condition yourself
- Check-in with individual periodically through the night
- Instruct friend or roommate to notify you immediately if individual passes out or their condition worsens
- Document situation if necessary

Response (Unconscious Individual Who Can't Be Roused)

- Call 911 immediately (don't try to guess the level of drunkenness)
- Call AOD (if you are not comfortable assessing situation or calling 911, call AOD first)
- Put individual in recovery position (see diagram below)
- Get roommate or friend to assist if necessary (possibly wait for ambulance or AOD)
- Monitor individual's breathing
- After help arrives and you resolve the situation, document situation if necessary

Recovery Position

