



**PHARMACEUTICALS EXPORT PROMOTION COUNCIL**  
(Set up by Ministry of Commerce & Industry, Govt., of India)

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Dated: 3<sup>rd</sup> Feb 2011

## **What Is Alcohol Poisoning? How Dangerous Is Alcohol Poisoning?**

When a person has alcohol poisoning they have consumed a toxic amount of alcohol, usually over a short period. Their blood alcohol level is so high it is considered toxic (poisonous). The patient can become extremely confused, unresponsive, disoriented, have shallow breathing, and can even pass out or go into a coma. Alcohol poisoning can be life-threatening and usually requires urgent medical treatment.

Binge drinking is a common cause of alcohol poisoning. However, it can also occur accidentally, as when somebody unintentionally drinks alcohol-containing household products (much less common).

When somebody consumes an alcoholic drink, their liver has to filter out the alcohol, a toxin, from their blood. We absorb alcohol much more quickly than food - alcohol gets to our bloodstream much faster. However, the liver can only process a limited amount of alcohol; approximately one unit of alcohol every hour.

If you drink two units in one hour, there will be an extra unit in your bloodstream. If during the next hour you drink another two units, you will have two units floating around in your bloodstream at the end of two hours after your drinking session. The faster you drink, the higher your BAC (blood alcohol concentration) becomes. If you drink too fast, your BAC can spike dangerously high.

Rapid drinking can bring your BAC so high that your mental and physical functions become negatively affected. Your breathing, heartbeat and gag reflex - which are controlled by types of nerves - might not work properly. You become breathless, you may choke, and your heart rhythm might become irregular. If your BAC is high enough, these physical functions can stop working, the patient stops breathing and passes out (loses consciousness).

In the USA approximately 50,000 cases of alcohol poisoning are reported annually. About one patient dies each week in the USA from alcohol poisoning.

Those at highest risk of suffering from alcohol poisoning are college students, chronic



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alcoholics, those taking medications that might clash with alcohol, and sometimes children who may drink because they wish to know what it is like.

## **What are the signs and symptoms of alcohol poisoning?**

Even when you stop drinking, your BAC can continue rising for up to thirty to forty minutes, resulting in worsening symptoms if you have already consumed a lot.

The following signs and symptoms may indicate a progression from being drunk to alcohol poisoning:

- Confusion
- Hypothermia (the person's body temperature drops)
- Pale skin, sometimes it may take on a bluish tinge
- The individual is unresponsive but conscious (stupor)
- The individual passes out
- Unusual breathing rhythm
- Very slow breathing
- Vomiting

In really serious cases breathing might stop completely, a heart attack may occur, there is a risk of choking in their own vomit, vomit might be inhaled into the lungs causing life-threatening damage. Hypothermia may become dangerous. If the individual loses too much fluid (severe dehydration) there is a risk of brain damage. If blood glucose levels drop they might have fits (seizures).

If the alcohol poisoning is extreme the patient can go into a coma and eventually die.

This article focuses on the health aspects of alcohol poisoning, rather than other dangers, such as getting into fights, losing possessions or having problems with the law.

## **Treatment and helping somebody with alcohol poisoning**

The National Health Service (NHS), UK, says that if you believe somebody is suffering from alcohol poisoning you should call for an ambulance, and provide the following assistance until it arrives:

- Try to keep the individual awake
- Try to keep them in a sitting position, not lying down



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- If they are able to take it, give them water
- If the person is unconscious put them in the recovery position and check they are breathing
- Don't give them coffee, it will worsen their dehydration
- Do not lie them on their back
- Do not give them any more alcohol to drink
- Do not make them walk

In hospital, depending on the patient's BAC level and severity of signs and symptoms, staff may just monitor them until their alcohol levels have dropped. A tube may be inserted into their windpipe to help with breathing, they may be given an intravenous drip to control hydration and blood glucose and vitamin levels, they may be fitted with a urinary catheter if they have become incontinent. In some cases the patient's stomach may be pumped - fluids are flushed through a tube that goes down their mouth or nose.

If the patient, who may sometimes be a child, has unintentionally drunk methanol or isopropyl alcohol and has alcohol poisoning they may need kidney dialysis to speed up the removal of toxins from their system.