



ALCOHOL INFORMATION

The push for zero tolerance laws, the tightening of standards for determining legal intoxication and the emergence of national groups concerned with alcohol misuse indicate that society is more sensitive than ever to the growing misuse of alcohol. Throughout American history, drinking alcohol as a social custom has been accepted by many people. Yet, many people see the use of alcohol as a contributing factor to many social ills. Alcohol use has been identified as a major national problem (Stot, Behrens and Rosemont, 1990) and is, by far, the number one drug of abuse. About 70% of adults use alcohol and approximately nine million have the disease alcoholism. Another seven million abuse alcohol, but do not meet the criteria for alcoholism. (National Institute on Drug Abuse, 2001)

Alcohol related consequences affect not only drinkers themselves, but also spouses, children, friends, employers, as well as strangers. Between 20 and 40 percent of all hospital beds are occupied by people being treated for medical, psychiatric and traumatic complications of alcohol use (NIDA, 2001).

Pharmacology of Alcohol—Alcohol is a sedative drug that acts as a central nervous system depressant. The brain and other parts of the central nervous system are the organs most sensitive to the effects of alcohol in the body.

Ethanol (or ethyl alcohol) is a type of alcohol that is formed by the fermentation of fruits, juices or cereal grains. Ethyl alcohol is toxic in large amounts. It is the type of alcohol found in alcoholic beverages. The body has ways to detoxify and eliminate ethyl alcohol. This is not true of other types of alcohol.

Methyl alcohol (or wood alcohol) is very toxic and can cause serious damage and even death when consumed. It is found in paint thinner and shellac.

Isopropyl alcohol, commonly called *rubbing alcohol*, is another type of alcohol that is not intended to be consumed.

Blood Alcohol Concentration (BAC)

BAC is expressed as a percent and is the ratio of alcohol in a person's blood to the person's total amount of blood. BAC can be measured through urine, breath or blood samples. Legal levels of intoxication are determined by a person's BAC. Intoxication is defined in the law as a certain BAC. The legal standard of intoxication in most states ranges from a BAC of 0.08 to 0.10.

When the BAC progresses to 0.10, muscular coordination, reaction time, judgment and perception are seriously impaired, making driving extremely dangerous. Drinkers with a BAC of 0.10 usually have consumed five drinks in an hour, have slurred speech and walk with a stagger.

Drinkers can acquire tolerance to some of the psychological and physical effects of alcohol through continued use. Tolerance is due to the nervous system adaptation to continued drinking. This results in larger amounts of alcohol being needed in order to produce effects that were experienced earlier in one's drinking history.

Underage drinking is a problem that is often overlooked in the "War on Drugs," yet it affects millions of teenagers. The use of alcohol among youth is pervasive. About nine out of every ten high school seniors have tried alcohol, and nearly six out of ten are regular users of alcohol (Johnston et al., 1991).

The average age that students take their first drink of alcohol is between 9 and 10 years of age. Students choose beer as their favorite alcoholic beverage because it tastes good, is easy to get, is cheap and it does not intoxicate you as fast as other alcoholic beverages.

Binge Drinking—the abuse of alcohol by students most frequently takes place through a drinking pattern called binge drinking. Binge drinking refers to the consumption of five drinks in a row at least once during a two week period. By its very nature, binge drinking can be dangerous. Drunk driving, physical violence, property destruction, date rape and police arrests are all associated with binge drinking.

Summary Insights

1. Alcohol is the drug of choice among students and the rest of society.
2. There are many factors that affect the rate of absorption of alcohol into the bloodstream.
3. As the BAC levels rise, predictable depressant effects take place.
4. Persons in acute alcohol intoxication must receive first-aid care immediately.
5. The health effects of chronic alcohol use are quite serious.
6. Problem drinking reflects an alcohol use pattern in which a drinker's behavior creates personal difficulties or problems for others.
7. Alcoholism is a primary, chronic disease with a variety of possible causes and characteristics.

8. Alcohol use has been linked to a variety of destructive behaviors, including an increased risk of accidents, violent acts and criminal activity, and increased domestic turmoil within a family.
9. The signs of possible alcoholism include secretive drinking, morning drinking, repeated attempts at abstinence, indiscriminate use of alcohol, having five or more drinks daily, having two or more blackouts while driving.
10. People can often avoid the use of alcohol by substituting other, positive alternatives, such as walking, enjoying friends and family, limiting the use of alcohol in the home and so on.

What You Can Do!

1. Choose healthful behaviors.
2. Participate in healthful situations.
3. Develop healthful relationships.
4. Make responsible decisions.
5. Use resistance skills.
6. Develop positive self-esteem.
7. Demonstrate character.
8. Abide by the laws.