

Alcohol poisoning

Drinking too much alcohol can kill. Alcohol poisoning or alcohol overdose is extremely dangerous and it is important that the person affected is looked after. Never be afraid to pass the problem over to someone else, particularly if they become violent. If in doubt, always call 000.

ALWAYS REMEMBER, YOU ARE A FRIEND, NOT A DOCTOR.

If someone has been drinking alcohol and you see any one of the following, you should seek medical help immediately by calling 000 – this is not something you can deal with alone:

- **The person is unconscious**
- **The skin is cold, clammy, pale or bluish or purplish in colour**
- **The person is breathing very slowly, if there are more than 10 seconds between breaths**
- **Vomiting without waking up**

Be aware that the police do not routinely attend an ambulance call, even if there are illegal drugs involved. The only reason the police will usually attend is if the paramedics ask them to be there. This is usually due to another crime taking place or the threat of violence.

What causes alcohol poisoning?

Alcohol, like any other drug taken in large amounts, can lead to an overdose situation. 'Binge drinking' or 'drinking to get drunk' is often the cause of alcohol poisoning, particularly among young people who do not have experience with alcohol and are not aware of their limits.

When someone drinks alcohol faster than their liver can metabolize it, the amount of alcohol in the blood rises, sometimes to a danger point. This can lead to an overdose situation. At very high blood alcohol levels, a person loses consciousness and goes into a coma. People do die due to alcohol poisoning.

What causes a death from alcohol poisoning?

When someone dies from alcohol poisoning it usually means one of the following things has happened:

- The blood alcohol level (i.e., the amount of alcohol in their body) was so high that the depressant effects of the drug slowed down the parts of the brain and nervous system that control breathing and the heart. Usually the drinker dies because he or she has stopped breathing and the heart has stopped, usually while unconscious

- The drinker has lost consciousness and because he or she is alone, or is not being monitored properly they may be sick and subsequently choke on their own vomit. There are also rare reports of an unconscious drinker choking on his or her own tongue
- The alcohol has reacted with another substance that the person has taken and has resulted in a death. This drug can be either prescribed by a doctor, an over-the-counter medication or an illegal substance. These deaths are extremely unpredictable as they can happen even if the person has not drunk a great deal

How do you know if someone needs medical assistance?

Not everyone who gets drunk needs medical assistance and most of the time people can look after friends who have drunk too much. Unfortunately, in some situations there may not be anyone who is sober enough to adequately look after people who have become unwell after drinking alcohol. Knowing when to hand over alcohol-affected friends to medical professionals is important.

Alcohol poisoning is extremely dangerous and it is important that the person affected is looked after appropriately. If someone has been drinking and you see any one of the following, you should seek

Medical Disclaimer

The information provided on this fact sheet is provided for information purposes only. As such it **cannot substitute for the advice of a medical professional**

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medical help immediately – this is not something you can deal with alone:

- **The person is unconscious** and can't be awakened by pinching, prodding or shouting
- **The skin is cold, clammy, pale or bluish or purplish in colour**, indicating they are not getting enough oxygen
- **The person is breathing very slowly, if there are more than 10 seconds between breaths** – this is an emergency
- **Vomiting without waking up**

People do die from alcohol poisoning. Although alcohol is consumed safely by many, things can go wrong and alcohol poisoning or overdose is a real risk if people drink too much, too quickly.