

Alcohol poisoning

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

If someone has been drinking alcohol, you should call 000 immediately if the person:

- is unconscious
- has cold, clammy, pale or bluish or purplish skin
- is breathing very slowly (if there are more than 10 seconds between breaths)
- vomits without waking up

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.

Never be afraid to pass the problem over to someone else, particularly if the person becomes violent. If in doubt, call 000.

ALWAYS REMEMBER, YOU ARE A FRIEND, NOT A DOCTOR

What causes alcohol poisoning?

Alcohol, like any other drug taken in large amounts, can lead to an overdose. '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 process it, the amount of alcohol in the blood rises, sometimes to a danger point. This can lead to an alcohol overdose. 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 looked after 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. The substance can be either a drug prescribed by a doctor, an over-the-counter medication or an illegal drug. These types of deaths can happen even if the person has not drunk a large amount of alcohol

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 look after those who have become unwell after drinking alcohol.

Knowing when to hand over alcohol-affected friends to medical professionals is important. You should call 000 immediately if the person:

- is unconscious and can't be awakened by pinching, prodding or shouting
- has cold, clammy, pale or bluish or purplish skin, indicating they are not getting enough oxygen

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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- is breathing very slowly – if there are more than 10 seconds between breaths
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Alcohol poisoning is extremely dangerous. It is important that the person receives medical help immediately. This is not something you can deal with alone.