

aBinge Drinking

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Binge drinking occurs when a person consumes a large amount of alcohol in a short amount of time. Because men and women metabolize alcohol at different rates, the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism defines binge drinking specifically as having five or more drinks in two hours or less for men and four or more drinks in two hours or less for women. Per these guidelines, one standard drink of alcohol is defined as containing 0.6 ounces of “pure” alcohol. By this definition, each of the following is considered one standard drink: 1.5 ounces of 80-proof hard liquor, 5 ounces of wine, or 12 ounces of regular beer.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, binge drinking poses a number of health risks. Consuming 4-5 drinks is the typical amount of alcohol it takes for a person’s blood alcohol concentration (or BAC level) to reach 0.08 percent or above. This amount meets the legal driving limit in every U.S. state, with the exception of Utah. In December 2018, Utah’s legal driving limit was lowered to 0.05 percent. Importantly, a person does not have to drink regularly to experience health problems as a result of their alcohol intake. For example, drinking large amounts of alcohol, even if infrequently, can increase a person’s chances of liver disease, brain damage, sexual dysfunction, high blood pressure, stroke, and cardiovascular diseases. The risk of alcohol poisoning also significantly increases with increased use. Alcohol—especially when consumed in excessive amounts—impairs one’s judgment and therefore puts the individual at risk of having an unintended pregnancy or contracting an STD due to unprotected

sex. Binge drinking can significantly impact others as well, regardless of whether or not they were also drinking. These “secondary binge effects” include being physically hit or assaulted, being a victim of sexual assault or date rape, getting into a serious argument, experiencing sleep disturbances, being insulted or humiliated, and/or having property damaged.

Research suggests that availability, price, and promotions of alcohol can influence the amount of alcohol consumed. Discounts and sales on larger amounts of alcohol and special promotions at bars and pubs are associated with an increased amount of alcohol consumed and higher rates of binge drinking. Alcohol consumption can also be influenced by *what* one is drinking. Studies have shown that the rate at which people drink increases significantly when drinking alcohol in combination with energy drinks. This can be explained by caffeine’s stimulant effect on a person’s body and how this effect impairs the individual’s ability to recognize the sedative effects of alcohol. Essentially, a person perceives themselves to be less intoxicated than they truly are, in turn leading them to consume larger amounts of alcohol, thus posing a greater likelihood of a binge drinking episode.

Binge drinking accounts for more than half of the alcohol consumed by adults in the U.S. Studies show that 1 in 6 adults in the U.S. engage in binge drinking, consuming roughly 8 drinks each binge. Those who begin drinking—especially binge drinking—in their early teens are more likely to develop an alcohol use disorder later in life. The age group with the largest amount of binge drinkers are young adults between the ages of 18-34 years old. However, people 65 years and older tend to engage in binge drinking more frequently than young adults, averaging 5-6 times per month. Because of the increased number of health issues managed with medication common to midlife and older adulthood, these populations are at a unique risk from binge drinking episodes. Specifically, medications and alcohol can interact in ways that exacerbate side effects, reduce the

effectiveness of medications, and in some cases—such as with benzodiazepines and opiates—significantly increase the risk of a fatal overdose.

It is not surprising that excessive alcohol consumption is associated with shorter lifespans and increased mortality rates. While college students are often commonly associated with binge drinking, this pattern of use is found across the lifespan. Consequently, those working in the medical and mental health fields should carefully consider their patients' and clients' patterns of alcohol use.

Further Reading

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