

Facts about Alcohol

Alcohol is a drug, a depressant, which slows down thinking and actions. It acts on the brain and affects all parts of the body. An average-size person's liver can break down about one drink per hour; the rest of the alcohol circulates throughout the body, affecting behavior, judgment, perception, and motor skills - such as driving and operating machinery.

Alcohol affects each individual differently. Smaller-size people, women, younger or older people, and those who are ill will feel stronger effects from the same amount of alcohol than larger people, middle-aged adults, or people who are in good physical health. People with a history of alcoholism in their family may also be affected differently than people who have no history of alcoholism in their family.

Alcohol abuse is a health risk. Abuse of alcohol can cause damage to many of the body's organs. Researchers report damage to brain tissue, heart muscle, and reproductive organs in both males and females. Alcohol may cause the drinker's blood pressure to rise, putting him or her at risk for heart attack and stroke. Stomach ulcers, poor nutrition, and sexual dysfunction have all been related to alcohol abuse.

Alcohol affects driving skills. Alcohol is involved in over half of the fatal car crashes in the U.S. Although many states consider a driver legally intoxicated when their Blood Alcohol Content reaches .10%, driving skills are affected at levels as low as .03%. This is especially true of younger drivers, who may be less experienced. Alcohol affects crucial driving skills like quick reflexes and vision.

Alcohol is harmful to unborn babies. Alcohol consumed by a pregnant woman enters the bloodstream of the fetus she is carrying. Alcohol can affect the fetus in many ways: slowing both physical and mental growth before and after birth; causing severe physical malformations of the face and brain; creating learning disabilities or retardation. The safe choice is not to drink during pregnancy.

Alcohol reacts with other drugs. Combining alcohol with certain over-the-counter or prescription drugs is dangerous. Drinking while taking medication may cause impairment of coordination, a sharp change in blood pressure, seizures, convulsions, and even death. Ask your doctor or pharmacist about how certain medications react with alcohol before combining drugs.

Alcohol abuse may lead to alcoholism. Drinking large enough amounts of alcohol over a period of time can produce alcoholism, a physical dependence on alcohol. People with a history of alcoholism in their family are at much greater risk of developing alcoholism themselves. Alcoholism is a treatable illness; family members and friends may need to obtain help, too.

More Facts

- Alcoholism is one of the most serious public health problems in the US today. Among the 18.3 million adult "heavier drinkers," 12.1 million have one or more symptoms of alcoholism, an increase of 8.2 percent since 1980.
- One of three American adults - 56 million Americans - says that alcohol abuse has brought trouble to his or her family.
- Chronic brain injury caused by alcohol is second only to Alzheimer's disease as a known cause of mental deterioration in adults.
- About 65 out of every 100 persons in the US will be in an alcohol-related crash at sometime in their life.
- Fifty-four percent of jail inmates convicted of violent crimes were drinking before they committed the offense.
- Over 80 percent of college presidents identify alcohol abuse as the biggest problem on campus.
- If a man and a woman of similar weight drink the same amount of alcohol, 30% more alcohol will enter the woman's bloodstream, because women have less of a certain stomach enzyme that digests alcohol.
- One Standard Drink is equal to: 12 oz. beer (5% alcohol); 5 oz. wine (12-17% alcohol) or 3 oz. fortified wine; 1.5 oz. hard liquor (80-proof)

If you or a family member is experiencing a mental health or an alcohol or other drug-related emergency, seek immediate assistance by calling the 24-hour Suicide Prevention, Mental Health Crisis, Information and Referral Hotline: (216) 623-6888 or the United Way's First Call for Help, 211 or (216) 436-2000.