

Binge Drinking

Chet has known Dave since they were in elementary school together, but lately their friendship has been strained. Dave's drinking on weekends has turned him into a completely different person. Dave used to get good grades and play sports, but since he started drinking he hasn't been finishing assignments and he has quit the soccer team.

When Chet saw Dave pound five beers in 30 minutes at two different parties, he realized how serious Dave's problem was.

What Is Binge Drinking?

Binge drinking used to mean drinking heavily over several days. Now, however, the term refers to the heavy consumption of alcohol over a short period of time (just as binge eating means a specific period of uncontrolled overeating).

Today the generally accepted definition of binge drinking in the United States is the consumption of five or more drinks in a row by men — or four or more drinks in a row by women — at least once in the previous 2 weeks. Heavy binge drinking includes three or more such episodes in 2 weeks.

Why Do People Binge Drink?

Liquor stores, bars, and alcoholic beverage companies make drinking seem attractive and fun. It's easy for a high school student to get caught up in a social scene with lots of peer pressure. Inevitably, one of the biggest areas of peer pressure is drinking.

Other reasons why people drink include:

- They're curious — they want to know what it's like to drink alcohol.
- They believe that it will make them feel good, not realizing it could just as easily make them sick and hung-over.
- They may look at alcohol as a way to reduce stress, even though it can end up creating more stress.
- They want to feel older.

Risks of Binge Drinking

Many people don't think about the negative side of drinking. Although they think about the possibility of getting drunk, they may not give much consideration to being hung-over or throwing up.

You may know from experience that excessive drinking can lead to difficulty concentrating, memory lapses, mood changes, and other problems that affect your day-to-day life. But binge drinking carries more serious and longer-lasting risks as well.

Alcohol Poisoning

Alcohol poisoning is the most life-threatening consequence of binge drinking. When someone drinks too much and gets alcohol poisoning, it affects the body's involuntary reflexes — including breathing and the gag reflex. If the gag reflex isn't working properly, a person can choke to death on his or her vomit.

Other signs someone may have alcohol poisoning include:

- extreme confusion
- inability to be awakened
- vomiting
- seizures
- slow or irregular breathing
- low body temperature
- bluish or pale skin

If you think someone has alcohol poisoning, call 911 immediately.

Impaired Judgment

Binge drinking impairs judgment, so drinkers are more likely to take risks they might not take when they're sober. They may drive drunk and injure themselves or others.

Driving isn't the only motor skill that's impaired, though. Walking is also more difficult while intoxicated. In 2000, roughly one third of pedestrians 16 and older who were killed in traffic accidents were intoxicated.

People who are drunk also take other risks they might not normally take when they're sober. For example, people who have impaired judgment may have unprotected sex, putting them at greater risk of a sexually transmitted disease (STD) or unplanned pregnancy.

Physical Health

Studies show that people who binge-drink throughout high school are more likely to be overweight and have high blood pressure by the time they are 24. Just one regular beer contains about 150 calories, which adds up to a lot of calories if someone drinks four or five beers a night.

Mental Health

Binge drinkers have a harder time in school and they're more likely to drop out. Drinking disrupts sleep patterns, which can make it harder to stay awake and concentrate during the day. This can lead to struggles with studying and poor academic performance.

People who binge-drink may find that their friends drift away — which is what happened with Chet and Dave. Drinking can affect personality; people might become angry or moody while drinking, for example.

Alcoholism

Some studies have shown that people who binge-drink heavily — those who have three or more episodes of binge drinking in 2 weeks — have some of the symptoms of alcoholism.

Getting Help

If you think you or a friend have a binge-drinking problem, get help as soon as possible. The best approach is to talk to an adult you trust — if you can't approach your parents, talk to your doctor, school counselor, clergy member, aunt, or uncle.

It can be hard for some people to talk to adults about these issues, so an alternative could be a trusted friend or older sibling who is easy to talk to. Drinking too much can be the result of social pressures, and sometimes it helps to know there are others who have gone through the same thing.

If you're worried, don't hesitate to ask someone for help. A supportive friend or adult could help you to avoid pressure situations, stop drinking, or find counseling.

Binge Drinking

1. What is binge drinking?
2. Name some risks of binge drinking.
3. List three signs someone may have alcohol poisoning.
4. Name one way binge drinking can affect your physical health.
5. Name one way binge drinking affects your mental health.