



Patient education: Alcohol poisoning (The Basics)

Written by the doctors and editors at UpToDate

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What is alcohol poisoning?

Alcohol poisoning is what happens if someone drinks far too much in a short amount of time. This is different from being drunk or having a little too much to drink. Alcohol poisoning is life-threatening. A person with alcohol poisoning could stop breathing or choke on their own vomit.

What are the symptoms of alcohol poisoning?

Some of the symptoms are the same as those for a person who is "just drunk." For instance, people who have alcohol poisoning can seem confused or have trouble standing up. But some of the other symptoms of alcohol poisoning are more serious. Alcohol poisoning can slow or stop a person's breathing. It can also cause seizures or an irregular heartbeat.

Alcohol poisoning is an emergency. **Call for an ambulance (in the US and Canada, call 9-1-1)** if someone:

- Stops breathing or goes 10 seconds or more without breathing
- Is breathing very slowly (fewer than 8 breaths in 1 minute)
- Turns blue or very pale, and their skin feels cool to the touch
- Has a seizure
- Is passed out and cannot be woken up at all
- Cannot stop vomiting
- Looks very sick

What will the doctors at the hospital do?

In the emergency department, doctors and nurses can:

- Monitor the person's breathing – If the person stops breathing, the doctors can put them on a breathing machine.
 - Give the person fluids through a thin tube that goes into a vein, called an "IV," if needed – This can be important if the person has been vomiting a lot.
 - Check for any other medical problems – People who have been drinking sometimes have other problems that are tough to spot, because they cannot tell you what they are feeling. For instance, people who have been drinking often fall down or otherwise hurt themselves. Doctors can use X-rays and other tools to check for possible injuries or other health problems.
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Is there anything doctors can do to get the alcohol out of your system?

No. Alcohol is absorbed into the body very quickly. It does no good to empty or "pump" the stomach. There is nothing that can soak up the alcohol or cancel out its effects. The only thing that gets rid of alcohol in the body is time.

What can you do at home to help keep someone safe?

For people who have been drinking but do not seem to need emergency care, you can:

- Keep checking their breathing and **call for an ambulance (in the US and Canada, call 9-1-1)** if their breathing slows too much or stops
- Lay them on their side, so that they do not choke on their own vomit if they throw up
- Check them for bumps, bruises, bleeding, or any sign of injury
- Make sure they stay warm (use blankets)

If someone you know drinks so much that you are afraid for their safety, this is a sign of alcohol use disorder. This is the medical term for alcoholism or alcohol addiction. When the person recovers, it might be good to sit down and talk about what happened. Suggest speaking to a doctor, nurse, or mental health expert. There are treatments that can help a person with an alcohol use disorder.

More on this topic

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Patient education: Cirrhosis (The Basics)

Patient education: Alcohol use — when is drinking a problem? (Beyond the Basics)

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