

The facts about...

# Acute alcohol **poisoning**



**Five key  
things you  
need to  
know**

for the facts  
**drinkaware.co.uk**

**Black coffee won't help. Nor will encouraging someone to be sick. Or leaving them to sleep it off.**

In fact, these traditional ways of trying to sober up a friend can do far more harm than good. Particularly if the friend is actually experiencing acute alcohol poisoning - which can be difficult to spot initially.

The amount someone has had to drink isn't always an indicator. By recognising the signs of acute alcohol poisoning and knowing what to do, you could save someone's life.

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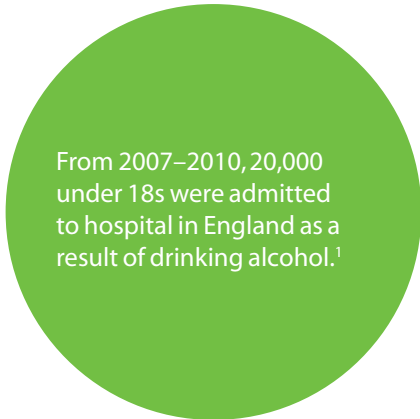
## Alcohol is a poison

Agatha Christie doesn't write about it as a murder weapon and it doesn't feature in Cluedo. But alcohol is a poison and can sometimes have lethal consequences.

Your body can only process one unit of alcohol an hour. Drink a lot in a short space of time and the amount of alcohol in the blood can stop the body from working properly. The consequences of alcohol poisoning can range from dizziness to more serious complications like brain damage and even death.

It can:

- **slow down your brain functions so you lose your sense of balance**
- **irritate the stomach which causes vomiting and it stops your gag reflex from working properly – you can choke on, or inhale, your own vomit into your lungs**
- **affect the nerves that control your breathing and heartbeat, it can stop both**
- **dehydrate you, which can cause permanent brain damage**
- **lower the body's temperature, which can lead to hypothermia**
- **lower your blood sugar levels, so you could suffer seizures**



From 2007–2010, 20,000 under 18s were admitted to hospital in England as a result of drinking alcohol.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> North West Public Health Authority, 2010, Local Alcohol Profiles. Available at <http://www.nwph.net/nwpho/publications/alcoholattributablefractions.pdf>

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## Look out for the signs

It can be a very fine line. One minute your house guest is stupidly drunk, the next they've become dangerously intoxicated. Being aware of the signs of alcohol poisoning is crucial, because if a person you care about is suffering from acute alcohol poisoning, they will be in no state to help themselves.

Look out for:

- **confusion**
- **loss of coordination**
- **vomiting**
- **seizures**
- **irregular or slow breathing**  
(less than eight breaths a minute)
- **blue-tinged or pale skin**
- **low body temperature (hypothermia)**
- **stupor – when someone's conscious but unresponsive**
- **unconsciousness – passing out**



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## Know what NOT to do

Acute alcohol poisoning can be extremely dangerous. Your best intentions could make it worse. There are so many myths around about how to deal with people who've drunk to excess, so it's a good idea to make sure you're aware of what NOT to do.

### **NEVER:**

#### **Leave someone to sleep it off**

The amount of alcohol in someone's blood continues to rise even when they're not drinking. Leave someone to sleep it off and there's a risk they could choke on their own vomit if they are lying on their back. Encouraging them to be sick could also be dangerous as their gag reflex won't be working properly.

#### **Walk them around**

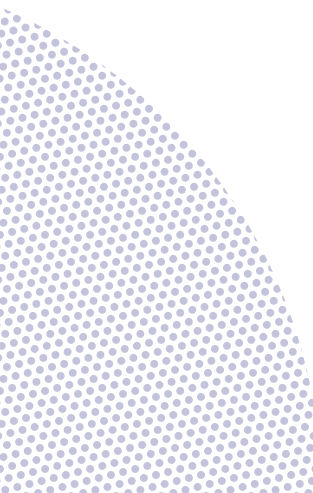
Alcohol is a depressant which slows down your brain's functions and affects your sense of balance. Walking them around might cause accidents.

#### **Put them under a cold shower**

Alcohol lowers your body temperature, which could lead to hypothermia. A cold shower could make them colder than they already are.

#### **Let them drink any more alcohol**

The amount of alcohol in their bloodstream could become dangerously high. Too much alcohol in the blood stops the body working properly.



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## There is no minimum amount

It's true that binge drinking is often the cause of alcohol poisoning. But not always.

How your body reacts to alcohol depends on your age, sex, size, weight, how fast you've been drinking, how much you've eaten, your general health and other drugs you might have taken.

Drinking a lot of alcohol in a short space of time can put you at risk – both in terms of your health and safety.

This is why it is so important to stick to the government's daily unit guidelines (3–4 units for men or 2–3 units for women).



More than 35,000 people were admitted to hospital with alcohol poisoning in England in 2010/11 (16,200 men and 19,800 women) – that's more than 600 every week.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> NHS Statistics on Alcohol: England, 2012. Table 4.1 & 4.2. p.73-74.

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## Don't wait for all the symptoms to show before getting help

Better safe than sorry is the rule for alcohol poisoning. If you think someone might be experiencing it, even if you have doubts, call 999 for an ambulance.

Every weekend, hundreds of people are taken into hospital with acute alcohol poisoning. Medical staff will monitor people who have less severe alcohol poisoning closely, until it's safe for them to go home. If it's more serious, they could:

- **insert a tube into their windpipe to help them breathe**
- **put them on a drip to top up their body's water, blood sugar and vitamin levels**
- **fit a catheter – a tube that allows them to empty their bladder straight into a bag**
- **pump the stomach by flushing fluids through a tube inserted into the nose or mouth**

### Five things to do if someone is showing signs of alcohol poisoning

1. Try to keep them awake and sitting up.
2. Give them some water, if they can drink it.
3. Lie them on their side in the recovery position if they've passed out, and check they're breathing properly.
4. Keep them warm.
5. Stay with them and monitor their symptoms.

If they're not getting any better, don't delay, dial 999 for an ambulance.



173 people died from accidental alcohol poisoning in England in 2010.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> NHS Statistics on Alcohol: England, 2012. Table 4.14. p.86.





## Staying in control

The government advises that people should not regularly drink more than the daily unit guidelines of 3–4 units of alcohol for men (equivalent to a pint and a half of 4% beer) and 2–3 units of alcohol for women (equivalent to a 175 ml glass of 13% wine). 'Regularly' means drinking every day or most days of the week.



**Here are three ways you can cut back and keep your drinking under control:**

**A Eat up.**

A healthy meal before you start drinking, and snacks between drinks, can help slow down the absorption of alcohol, helping you stay in control.

**B Pace yourself.**

Sipping a soft drink or water between alcoholic drinks slows down the rate of your drinking and means you'll drink less over the course of the night.

**C Keep in touch.**

If you decide to leave your friends during a night out, or when leaving their house to go home, let them know where you are going. Plan your route home or book a taxi in advance and make sure you text or call your friends to let them know you got there okay.

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# We've got the answers at **drinkaware.co.uk**

## Advice

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## Other useful contacts

For young people, visit The Site for regularly updated guides that take a comprehensive look at alcohol, drugs and much more. [www.thesite.org](http://www.thesite.org)

Your GP can help you figure out if you should make any changes to your drinking, and offer help and advice.

If you're concerned about someone's drinking, or your own, Drinkline runs a free, confidential helpline. Call 0800 917 8282.

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