

Alcohol: The Socially Acceptable Killer

A few days before Christmas, a man in his 60s was brought to the Oneida Health Emergency Department (ED) after neighbors found him severely confused and stumbling around outside his home. Over the phone, his family explained that he had been drinking alcohol in varying amounts since he was a teen, but a recent retirement and divorce pushed his daily use up to a half a handle of whiskey. He now had a brain disorder known as encephalopathy, one of the many life-threatening conditions that can be caused due to chronic excess alcohol consumption. If not treated promptly, it can lead to permanent dementia, inability to form new memories, mood changes, and more.

Stories like his are not uncommon in the ED. The holidays are common times of struggle for those who drink alcohol. People with underlying mental health issues often drink to suppress facing loneliness and difficult emotions.

The most frequently used substance in the United States is alcohol. According to the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA), alcohol kills more people each year than all other drug overdoses combined – including opioids (fentanyl, heroin, prescription pain killers), methamphetamines, cocaine, and others.

When most people think of alcohol-related deaths, they may consider “acute” causes – car crashes, falls, violence, drownings. But most alcohol-related deaths are “chronic,” caused by its long-term health effects. Many are aware of alcohol’s toxic effects to the liver, causing cirrhosis and lethal organ failure. However, it is less widely known that alcohol has been strongly linked to many other diseases. According to the NIAAA, alcohol is a carcinogen, a substance known to cause cancer. They cite that alcohol misuse is strongly associated with numerous types of cancers throughout the body, and that even modest drinking can increase risk of certain types.

Alcohol also contributes to high blood pressure, heart disease, stroke, mental health conditions, dementia, infections, and bleeding – common killers in the ED. Additionally, it makes weight and diabetes management more difficult, increases pain, decreases rates of safe sex (increases rates of sexually transmitted infections and unplanned pregnancies), worsens digestive diseases, impairs sleep – the list goes on.

As we approach the holiday season, it is important to remember that Thanksgiving, Christmas, and New Years Eve are incredibly common settings for binge drinking at parties, driving under the influence, and modeling the misuse of alcohol in front of young people.

According to the [Madison](#) and [Oneida](#) County Community Health Assessments, on average about 1 in 5 adults report binge drinking within the past month. And teens? A survey revealed that 1 in 10 7th-12th graders report binge drinking. The NIAAA warns that binge drinking – consuming 4 or 5 standard drinks on one occasion for women and men, respectively – significantly increases the risk of developing alcohol use disorder (AUD), a serious medical condition where people have impaired ability to control their alcohol use despite unfavorable consequences. Additionally, about 1 in 1,290 people are injured or killed in alcohol-related car crashes each year in our community (being involved in one of these accidents carries the same chance as rolling snake eyes twice).

What can you do? When it comes to drinking, less is always better. Limiting your intake will decrease risks to your physical, mental, and social wellbeing. The CDC states that we tend to spend time with people who drink similar amounts, and that teens are much more likely to drink alcohol and become future excessive drinkers if the adults around them binge. For you and those around you, especially the youth, be a role model. Never get behind the wheel when alcohol is on-board – if you plan on drinking, make sure you have a smart plan. In the ED, I see the many faces of alcohol's harm – crash and violence victims whose lives end or change forever in an instant, and the long-time drinkers whose bodies are irreversibly breaking down due to years of use. I hope that through recognizing alcohol's harmful effects to individual and community health, I will help people question alcohol's long-held socially accepted status, and prevent more of these ED visits from occurring.

Acknowledging that drinking has become a problem for you or someone you care about is incredibly difficult due to the stigma – especially because alcohol use is so socially accepted. If you want to understand your drinking habits and learn strategies to drink less, Google “Check Your Drinking” and use the CDC's tool to generate a free assessment and plan specific to you.

Locally in Madison County, if you or someone you know is struggling with substance use, confidential support, information, and referral specialists are available through BRiDGES at 315-697-3947.



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