

Alcohol sans scare tactics

By Beth Gaiser

Which of the following words doesn't seem to fit: alcohol, friends, music, weekend and moderation. Given the first four you get the stereotypical college scene— add the last and you're probably ready to blip over this article as yet another scare tactic against drinking. Actually, this isn't a slam on drinking so keep reading—

Sometimes advice is given on the grounds of "do this because..." but this approach fails because there's no logical explanation as to why. I was thumbing through a text book one day and found a feature on "alcohol and the body;" no scare tactics; just facts. And alcohol metabolism, as it turns out, is really a fascinating process.

Have you ever wondered why some people can drink, drink and drink and appear unscathed while others stumble around in a stupor and suffer the consequences the day after? How each individual manages alcohol is a function of body size, metabolism, genetics and experience.

When alcohol is ingested, it gets priority over food in the digestive tract. While foods must be broken down into their constituent molecules, the alcohol molecule is readily absorbed across the stomach lining directly into the blood. Naturally, when one drinks on an empty stomach, alcohol freely diffuses. Food slows diffusion because it coats the stomach walls and potential contact points for diffusion.

Once in the blood, alcohol passes through the liver. Enzymes in the liver "detoxify" the substance and the by-products are excreted. If speed and quantity of alcohol ingestion surpass the liver's detoxifying capacity, the excess

goes back into general circulation.

Alcohol in general circulation passes through the brain. While alcohol in small amounts may act like a stimulant, it is actually a narcotic: it slows and sedates. The first narcotic affect of alcohol is in the frontal lobe of the brain where reasoning and judgment ability are located. Hence the "social lubricant" use of alcohol. As drinking continues, speech and vision are affected, followed by large muscle coordination. If one "out drinks" one's liver, loss of inhibition occurs, then slurring and double vision, and finally staggering and impaired coordination. For the average man or woman, three drinks per hour will render these effects and it's not a good idea to drive. Since judgment is impaired, one may think - "Ah, I can drive!" Don't plan ahead and carry some spare dollars for a cab. Drunk driving accidents are a major killer andcrippler of college-aged individuals (besides, it's illegal and a criminal record isn't an impressive thing to have when looking for a job after college).

"Passing out" after one drinks too much is actually the body's emergency shut down system. If one continues to drink, finally the conscious brain is sedated into unconsciousness. An unconscious person stops drinking and the body goes to work to reestablish homeostasis. Lethal alcohol poisoning is possible however, if one drinks rapidly and excessively before finally passing out. Alas, for straight shots, hard alcohol chug-a-lugs and the like. The danger is real so be careful.

Alcohol inhibits the production of a hormone responsible for body hydration. If the hormone is inhibited, excess urination ensues. Dehydration ultimately follows excess urination and a vicious cycle

occurs. One feels thirsty, has another beer, dashes to the bathroom again, etc. etc. It's a good idea to space drinks with a glass of water. This gives the liver a chance to catch up and also lessens the symptoms of a hangover: much of the headachey, cotton mouth sensation is a result of dehydration.

Alcohol dehydrogenase is the main enzyme system responsible for alcohol detoxification. Drop that word at your next gathering and your friends will be impressed. "So - keeping your alcohol dehydrogenase busy tonight?" This enzyme system actually becomes more efficient as one drinks more regularly. The potential limits of this are finite however and even the most seasoned drinker is still vulnerable to excess.

Occasional drinkers or people who are malnourished (as from starvation dieting) have less of the enzymes and are affected by alcohol more severely. Body weight also has a role in how much liquor one can handle. The larger the individual, the more blood they have to dilute alcohol. A petite woman cannot expect to fare as well as a large man when both drink the same quantity.

Genetics play a crucial role in alcohol metabolism - especially in the development of chemical dependency. If close family members are alcoholics, one would be wise to drink with extreme care. According to Dr. Donald Goodwin, a person who has one parent who is alcoholic has a three to four fold increase in risk for alcoholism.

Alcoholism has been perceived for centuries as a weakness of will. Actually, what occurs in the majority of alcoholics

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FROM THE HIP

INSIDE

CHILDREN OF ALCOHOLICS

KICK THE HABIT

ADDICTIONS

SUPPORT GROUPS

A part of the Counseling Center's programming to assist students who are grappling with mental health issues. Students needing support in the areas of adult children of alcoholics, eating disorders, women's issues, are just a few of the groups offered. Contact the Counseling Center for more information at 346-3227.

NEED SOME PRACTICAL EXPERIENCE FOR THE "REAL" WORLD???

Peer Health Advising, HEP 410 and 510 offers practical experience in public speaking, facilitating groups, organizing promotion projects and writing for the Well Now. You must apply, so drop by Health Education at the Student Health Center. For more information call 346-4456.

NEED HELP WITH A TERM PROJECT OR PAPER OR SPEECH?

The Health Education Library has free pamphlets, handouts and current articles on a variety of topics. A peer health adviser can help you fill in the gaps of your health knowledge and direct you toward more resources on campus and in Lane County.

QUICK FACTS ON CAMPUS DRUG USE

20 to 25% of college students have drinking problems. Alcohol is the largest drug problem on campus. A 12 oz. mug of beer equals a 4 ounce glass of wine or a 1 ounce shot glass of hard liquor. One in ten people who drink alcohol become chemically dependent. Contributed by Jeff M. Johnson, Source: The College Student's Health Guide.