

Commentary

FROM FREEDOM INSTITUTE

Helping Teens Say S.O.S.: Tips for Handling Alcohol Poisoning

BY KATHERINE PRUDENTE, LCAT, RDT

Every fall brings tragic news of students who die of alcohol poisoning on school campuses. These tragedies could often be averted if teens were better prepared to call for help. Caring adults need to send a clear message to their kids: alcohol poisoning is a serious medical emergency that requires immediate medical attention. While underage drinking is not condoned, if friends become highly intoxicated, teens should not hesitate to call 911 and involve adults, without fear of punishment.

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Alcohol poisoning occurs when the quantity of alcohol in the blood is so high that respiration is threatened. Teens are at a much higher risk of alcohol poisoning than adults because they metabolize alcohol less efficiently. They get drunker faster and stay drunker longer — on less alcohol. Binge drinking (i.e., 4-5 drinks in a single sitting), common among teens, causes Blood Alcohol Content to rise to dangerous levels too quickly. The liver has no time to catch up, creating a backlog of alcohol in the blood stream. Drinking after using any drug, prescribed or illicit, can increase the risks of alcohol poisoning.

Make your teen aware of the warning signs of alcohol poisoning.¹ The primary symptom is usually vomiting — the body's attempt to protect itself by preventing alcohol that remains in the stomach from being absorbed into the bloodstream. Additional signs are:

¹ Adapted from, "Dying High: Teens in the ER," Human Relations Media 2004.

Freedom Institute, founded by Mona Mansell in 1976, is a resource center for individuals and families affected by alcohol and drug dependence, providing assessment, intervention, treatment and care. In addition, the Institute provides a comprehensive prevention and education program for young people through their work in independent schools.

- An inability to stand up or remain standing without assistance
- A lack of response to talking or shouting or physical contact, i.e., shaking, poking or pinching
- Clammy, cool skin, or bluish to purplish skin that appears flushed
- Passing out, and unresponsiveness to revival attempts
- Vomiting while passed out, and not waking up
- Slow, irregular breathing, an irregular pulse or a pulse rate slower than 40 beats per minute

These symptoms should not be taken lightly. The only solution to alcohol poisoning is to call 911 and remain with the person in need until EMS has arrived.

Teens are sometimes fearful that if they call for help they will get in trouble with their parents, or that if they call 911 for an ambulance they will be arrested. They also fear the intoxicated friend will be mad at them the next day for "getting them in trouble." In our experience, there has not been a case of an arrest when 911 has been called for alcohol poisoning. In a medical emergency, saving someone's life trumps any action, legal or otherwise.

Parental involvement is important, as is communicating your expectations regarding alcohol and drug use. Tell your children what your expectations are regarding calling for help. Use language like: "I expect you NOT to drink. But, I always want you to call me or call 911 if you are in a risky situation. I would much rather you call for

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help than worry about being punished. I will be more upset if you DON'T call for help when it is needed.”

Teens struggle to act responsibly in a time of crisis. As caring adults, we must send them a clear message that promotes healthy behavior, prepares them to respond appropriately in a dangerous situation, and simultaneously conveys our support. ●

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