New Year, Old Myths, New Fatalities: Alcohol-Related Traffic Deaths Jump During Christmas and New Year's

National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, National Institutes of Health

Bethesda, MD, Dec. 23, 2013 /PRNewswire/ -- Some holiday predictions are, tragically, very predictable. For example, more people are likely to die in alcohol-related traffic crashes during the holidays than at other times of the year.

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Statistics show that during Christmas and New Year's, two to three times more people die in alcohol-related crashes than during comparable periods the rest of the year. And 40 percent of traffic fatalities during these holidays involve a driver who is alcohol-impaired, compared to 28 percent for the rest of December.

Myths Persist

Even though many of us are aware of these troubling statistics, myths about drinking and driving persist -- myths that, for some, can prove fatal. Scientific studies supported by the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA) provide important information that challenges these widespread, yet incorrect, beliefs about how quickly alcohol affects the body and how long these effects can last.

Alcohol's Effects Begin Quickly

Holiday revelers may not recognize that critical driving-related skills and decision-making abilities are diminished long before they show physical signs of intoxication.

Initially, alcohol acts as a stimulant and people who drink may temporarily feel upbeat and excited. But they shouldn't be fooled. Alcohol soon affects inhibitions and judgment, leading to reckless decisions behind the wheel.

As more alcohol is consumed, reaction time suffers and behavior becomes poorly controlled and sometimes aggressive -- further compromising driving abilities. Continued drinking can lead to the slurred speech and loss of balance that we typically associate with being drunk. At higher levels, alcohol acts as a depressant, which causes the drinker to become sleepy and sometimes pass out.

Even When Drinking Stops -- Alcohol's Effects Do Not

During a night of drinking, it's also easy to misjudge alcohol's lasting effects. Many revelers believe that they can drive safely once they stop drinking and have a cup of coffee. The truth is that alcohol continues to affect the brain and body long after the last drink has been downed. Even after someone stops drinking, alcohol in the stomach and intestine continues to enter the bloodstream, impairing judgment and coordination for hours.

Driving home late at night is especially hazardous because the depressant action of alcohol magnifies a person's natural drowsiness. Driving abilities may even be impaired the next day, when any alcohol remaining in the system -- or the headache and disorientation associated with hangovers -- contributes to feelings of sluggishness, even though the person no longer feels drunk.

Before You Celebrate -- Plan Ahead

Of course, we don't intend to harm anyone when we get behind the wheel during the holiday season. Yet traffic fatalities persist and myths about drinking live on -- even though scientific studies have documented how alcohol affects the brain and body.

Because individuals are so different, it is difficult to give specific advice about drinking. But certain facts are clear -- there's no way to speed up the brain's recovery from alcohol and no way to make good decisions when you are drinking too much, too fast.

So this holiday season,New Year's Eve do not underestimate the effects of alcohol. Don't believe you can beat them. Here are some tips to keep in mind if you choose to drink:

- Pace yourself. Know what constitutes a standard drink and have no more than one per hour.
- Have "drink spacers" -- make every other drink a nonalcoholic one.
- Make plans to get home safely. Remember that a designated driver is someone who hasn't had any alcohol, not simply the person in your group who drank the least.

Sobering Up -- Mythsand Facts

Myth: You can drive as long as you are not slurring your words or acting erratically.

Fact: The coordination needed for driving is compromised long before the signs of intoxication are visible. Plus, the sedative effects of alcohol increase the risk of nodding off or losing attention behind the wheel.

Myth: Drink coffee. Caffeine will sober you up.

Fact **:** Caffeine may help with drowsiness, but not with the effects of alcohol on decision-making or coordination. The body needs time to metabolize (break down) alcohol and then to return to normal. There are no quick cures -- only time will help.

Have a safe holiday season!

For more information on celebrating your holidays safely and tips for cutting back, visit: http://www.rethinkingdrinking.niaaa.nih.gov.

SOURCE National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, National Institutes of Health

For further information: NIAAA Press Office, John Bowersox, 301-443-3860, NIAAAPressOffice@mail.nih.gov

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