

News

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DALLAS--Holidays bring out the best in some people--unfortunately, they bring out the beast in others. Among the beastly behavior most commonly observed is the tendency some people have toward overimbibing that ancient and most abused mind-altering drug--alcohol. In fact, something seems to compel even those solid citizens who drink little during the year to indulge during the holiday season. And far too many of these revelers take to the wheel with a high level of alcohol racing through their blood: statistics show that more than 25,000 persons die on the nation's roads as a result of alcohol-related accidents each year.

"One of the things that alcohol does is to make people unaware of their limits," says Dr. Kenneth Altshuler, professor and chairman of the Department of Psychiatry at The University of Texas Health Science Center at Dallas. Altshuler is a member of the board of the Dallas Council on Alcoholism, which, along with the Texas Commission on Alcoholism and various area businesses and industries, is sponsoring a campaign to promote responsible drinking and driving throughout December.

The psychiatrist lists two major reasons why people are likely to drink more--or more likely to drink--during holidays. First, he says, "there are simply more gatherings where alcohol is served during the holidays, so there is more opportunity and possibly more peer pressure to join in. In addition, there is an ambivalence in our culture with the holiday season. On the one hand, there is the gaiety and comradeship associated with these special days. But on the other, the season marks passage of another year. There may be nostalgia, even sadness, associated with memories of holidays gone by."

Altshuler stresses that these are only two reasons for holiday drinking--there are many others.

"Remember drinking, like any other behavior, can be motivated by a thousand different things. In many situations, alcohol acts as a social lubricant: everyone feels uneasy in strange situations, and alcohol may give the person a feeling of confidence. This may even be helpful for people who stop at this point."

Another reason the psychiatrist mentions for drinking alcoholic beverages is that some people use them as self-administered sedatives or tranquilizers. Depressed people, for example, may medicate themselves with alcohol to mitigate the pain of depression or to avoid awareness of such feelings altogether.

Both Dallas and Fort Worth councils on alcoholism have working projects, called Holidays Ahead, to cut down on drinking and driving. Bumper stickers and fliers about the campaign are available through the individual agencies. Dallas: (214) 638-7090; Fort Worth: (817) 332-6329. Both campaigns are stressing responsible behavior--behavior that one adopts for oneself as well as looking out for friends and

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family members who might be planning to drive after they have had too much to drink. Marilyn Ng-A-Qui, information/education specialist, says that there are handy tips hosts and hostesses can follow to help keep their guests sober.

First, she says, don't push drinks on anyone. And have plenty of food to serve, especially food that is neither too salty, too sweet or too hot with peppers. Encourage your guests to eat before they begin drinking--especially if they haven't had a meal shortly before coming to your home. It's also good to encourage people to stop and eat throughout the party. During these food breaks, it would be a good idea to drink non-alcoholic beverages, which should be displayed just as attractively as alcoholic ones. UTHSCD biochemist Don Wiggans says that these eating breaks may not be good for your waistline, but taking a break from alcohol will give your body a chance to metabolize the alcohol you have already consumed. Taking "breaks from the booze" every once in a while will do the same thing.

The cocktail party is an American institution. "There are never enough seats so people will mix and mingle," says Altshuler. However, this tradition may lead to overindulgence, says Ng-A-Qui. Even if you need to plan a smaller party or invite guests in "shifts," have plenty of seating.

"If a person is standing up with a glass in his or her hand, it's more likely that the drink will be gone quickly and almost unnoticed," she says. "But if you're sitting down, you are putting your glass down, talking and then picking it up again."

Wiggans agrees this may help. "It's rather like that old psychological tip about losing weight: lay your fork down on the table between each bite."

Altshuler says that having a more intimate party may help the host and/or hostess be more in control of any situation regarding guests' drinking. "Peer pressure will help if it's a more intimate group of friends, and things get out of hand."

Never should a host or hostess let a guest drive if it looks as if the person is intoxicated, says Ng-A-Qui. "You can ask the date or spouse to drive, get a friend to take him or her home, call a taxi--or even insist they spend the night." On New Year's Eve someone who has had too much to drink can call the council's freeride-home services (638-7090 in Dallas and 332-6329 in Fort Worth).

"Try to use tact," says Altshuler, "and help them to make the optimal decision in that kind of situation."

Besides encouraging guests to take alcohol breaks and to eat both before beginning to drink and at intervals throughout the party, the host or hostess can help control drinking behavior by the choice of food served.

Linda Brinkley, a research dietitian at UTHSCD, says that too sweet, too hot and, especially, salty food and drink, may lead the unsuspecting party-goer into drinking too much. And while planning the menu is not easy--and a little more expensive--it might be worth it in terms of human lives.

Among the absolute no-nos are salty snacks like potato chips, pickles, commercial dips, salted nuts and olives. Cheese, another popular snack food, is also high in sodium content. Not only is salt added to most cheeses, but salt also plays an important role in the cheese-making process. Some gourmet cheeses, like Greek feta, is also packed in brine. Also, many of the ingredients we often use in party food preparation are highly salted. These include dip mixes, packaged flavorings or spice mixes, canned chili or beans, ketchup and Worchester and soy sauce. On the other hand,

there is good news. The situation is not impossible. Brinkley suggests slicing roast beef, turkey or pork loin for sandwiches or making salads from these meats with a little mayonnaise (perhaps thinned with milk or with sour cream added) and something like cucumber or apple chips instead of pickles. Also, unsalted tuna is easily available. Chili dip can be made from scratch, but use your own blend of chili powder, thyme, cumin and oregano, and cook your own beans, whether you're serving them with the chili or fried. Low-sodium cheeses, including cheddar, Muenster and Monterrey Jack, are available for sandwiches or to serve with low-sodium crackers or fresh fruit. You can even make chili con queso if you don't make it too peppery. Both corn and potato chips are now available in unsalted versions.

Buy sour cream or yogurt for dips, but season them with chopped vegetables or salt-substitute spice mixes. Low-sodium crackers can be served with the dips, or you can use a tray of fresh vegetables. Fruit can also be used with appropriate dips, and sweet yogurt without sugar is also available. Also, fresh nuts make wonderful mixes.

Too sweet food can also lead to thirst, says Brinkley. Instead of a rich black forest cake, think in terms of something lighter like angel food iced with whipped cream or an egg-white based icing. The high concentrations of sugar in many traditional holiday desserts should be avoided at party time for this reason. An alternative to cakes, cookies and pies might be frozen yogurt.

In the Southwest, especially, many party-goers like hot peppers. Take caution, says the dietitian. Not only are they usually pickled, which means a concentration of salt but their heat also quickly leads to thirst. A glass may not be enough to put out a burn. Use only fresh peppers, and use them sparsely.

Holiday beverages may also lead to more thirst. Among the worst offenders are bloody Marys made from salty tomato or tomato-based juices, Margaritas with their salty rims and salty dogs. Forget the rims, hide the salt shakers and buy salt-free tomato juice, Brinkley suggests.

And don't forget that the same specialty sections in grocery stores, health food stores and nutrition centers that stock many of these low-sodium or salt-free foods, may also carry "alternative" beverages. You can now buy alcohol-free beer and wine, as well as sparkling apple and grape juice to serve instead of champagne. Try them for "breaks"--or if you want to separate your true friends from the "party rounders," serve them exclusively.

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NOTE: For information about the Holidays Ahead campaigns to cut down drunk driving, call Marilyn Ng-A-Qui in Dallas at (214) 638-7090 or Marilyn Anderson at (817) 336-2828. For nutrition information or questions about the biochemistry of alcohol and its metabolism, call Ann Harrell in the Office of Medical Information UTHSCD, at (214) 688-3404 for referral.

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