

Driving Safely by Avoiding Alcohol

Safe driving requires that you have total mental focus, physical coordination, and sound judgment. Many things can impair you mentally and physically, making driving dangerous, including the adverse effects of medications and the use of drugs such as alcohol.

Alcohol is a powerful drug that impairs many of your important mental functions. Initially, the effects of alcohol are subtle, which can be dangerous because a person under the influence of alcohol is not a good judge of how impaired he or she has become. For this reason, you should never drink alcohol and drive. There is no safe amount of alcohol for anyone driving a

motor vehicle, boat, airplane, or operating heavy equipment. Choose someone to drive or operate these vehicles or equipment who will not drink alcohol (a “**designated driver**”).

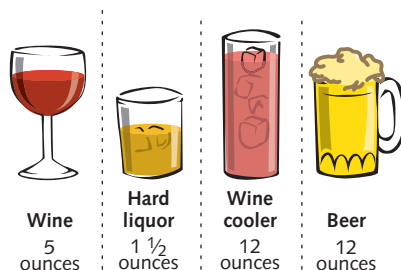
Two articles in the May 3, 2000, issue of *JAMA* report on the significant percentage of motor vehicle–related deaths of children that are associated with drivers who have been drinking alcohol.

BLOOD ALCOHOL CONCENTRATION:

Blood alcohol concentration (BAC) is a measure of the amount of alcohol in a person’s blood. The BAC is often used to determine if a person has exceeded the legal limit for operating a motor vehicle on a public road. Although legal limits for BAC levels have been set in most states, impairment in driving skills can occur with any amount of alcohol in the bloodstream. That is why it is recommended that you do not drink any alcohol if you plan to operate a motor vehicle.

DIFFERENT TYPES OF DRINKS:

Similar amount of alcohol per drink



DESIGNATED DRIVER:

If you are going to any function where alcohol may be served, and you are the only one driving you cannot drink. If you are with another adult who drives, you should choose who will be the designated driver who will not drink alcohol (make this decision before you arrive at the function).

If you are hosting a function, take responsibility for your guests:

- Ask guests to appoint a designated driver as they are arriving
- Provide a variety of non-alcohol drinks for your guests, especially for the designated drivers
- If you find that someone does not have a designated driver, make other arrangements for them (call a taxi, arrange for a ride with another group who has a designated driver, drive him or her home, or invite him or her to stay over)

INCREASING EFFECTS OF ALCOHOL:

Effects of increasing levels of alcohol in the body (each person’s experience of alcohol can be different and can be different from one situation to the next):

- Impaired judgment
- Lack of coordination
- Staggering, slurred speech, confusion
- Unconsciousness, memory lapses, or “blackouts”
- Risk of death from alcohol poisoning

METABOLIZING ALCOHOL:

Your liver **metabolizes** (“breaks down”) alcohol and this process takes some time. Even though time has passed between drinks, the amount of alcohol in the blood can continue to rise if more alcohol comes into the body than the liver can metabolize in the given time period. It takes your body about 1 hour to metabolize 1 drink. Therefore, if you have 2 drinks that contain alcohol early in the evening, then have dinner and then have more drinks later, the alcohol levels in your blood could easily rise over the legal limit for driving, because your body is still metabolizing the alcohol from earlier. Everyone’s body is different and different factors affect how quickly or slowly your body metabolizes alcohol in a given situation. Therefore, it is important not to drink alcohol if you are going to drive.

ALCOHOL INTERACTIONS:

Alcohol can interact with medications and other substances. Never drink alcohol while you are taking prescription or nonprescription medications, unless your doctor tells you that it is safe to do so.

FOR MORE INFORMATION:

- National Clearinghouse for Alcohol and Drug Information
800/729-6686 or www.health.org
- Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD)
MADD Safe Party Guide
800-GET-MADD (800-438-6233)
www.madd.org/programs/safe_party.shtml

INFORM YOURSELF:

To find this and previous *JAMA* Patient Pages, check out the AMA’s Web site at www.ama-assn.org/consumer.htm.

Additional Sources: National Clearinghouse for Alcohol and Drug Information, National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD), The AMA Family Medical Guide, The AMA Encyclopedia of Medicine, The AMA Complete Guide to Women’s Health

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