

When alcohol becomes TOXIC

Medical professionals say signs of alcohol poisoning are often ignored

By Kristen Johnson | Features Editor

It's 1 a.m. during Grand Prix week and you've been dominating beer pong for hours. You look across the smoke-filled room, and your eyes fall on your friend, who is stumbling across the slick floor as he bumps into a group of women doing their best Britney Spears impersonations on the dance floor. His eyes fight from closing and he is unable to utter a single understandable statement. Should you take him to the hospital or let him sleep?

"Anytime someone is passed out - blacked out - they're on second-degree alcohol poisoning," said Marty Green, clinical social worker and addictions specialist for Purdue University Counseling and Psychological Services. "That means two-thirds of the brain has been shut off as a result of drinking a lot."

According to Green, there are three stages of alcohol poisoning. The first stage is when a person shows signs such as nausea, slurred speech and possible difficulty walking. The second includes vomiting in addition to passing out. The last is a

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state of extreme medical risk, with convulsions, seizures and the possibility of enough alcohol consumption for a coma or cardiac arrest.

"If someone is throwing up convulsively, or they might start throwing up blood, they need to be checked out medically," Green said.

He said concern needs to arise if the intoxicated person does not acknowledge voice or touch. For example, if someone shakes a passed-out student's arm with no reaction, the danger zone is reached.

The sex and body size of a person, combined with how much food is in their stomach

and how much stress they are under, all determine how certain amounts of alcohol will effect different people.

"Lots of times when people pass out, people tuck them up and they shut the door. Well, there's been numerous times when people have gotten up and fallen out of windows or off of roofs and do really unpredictable things," Green said. "It's always going to be important to have folks just keeping an eye on them and checking in on them."

A prevalent question on the minds of some students is what to do if their heavily intoxicated friend is underage, and they fear getting in trouble with law by going to the hospital. In the last

few years, Green said he's probably seen 4,500 students run into this exact situation.

"Is it worth someone potentially being really seriously injured?" he said. "I work in the emergency rooms, and they're not going to call the police. It's up to the doctor's discretion, but they're not going to do that unless there's a reason for it."

Susan Straw, a nursing supervisor at Home Hospital, said if it's impossible to tell if someone has crossed the line into being dangerously intoxicated, then it's safer to bring the person to the hospital as a precaution.

"Alcohol poisoning is deadly," she said. "There's also aspiration - when someone starts vomiting and they're so out of it

that they breathe that into their lungs. You literally drown in your own vomit."

Green said Grand Prix is consistently a heavy drinking week and weekend, and he hopes students are careful.

"Obviously the more hydrated that folks are, that's positive. And food in the stomach," Green said. "If students are going to choose to drink, spacing them. If folks are going to drink underage, they're rolling the dice."