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501 W. Third Street
Suites 3 & 4 Sprinchorn Bldg.
Jamestown, NY 14701
Phone: 716.664.3608
Fax: 716.664.3661

51 E. Third Street
Suite 2
Dunkirk, NY 14048
Phone: 716.366.4623
Fax: 716.366-4624

Email: info@casacweb.org
Website: www.casacweb.org

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The Truth About Holiday Spirits

Everyone likes to celebrate during the holidays, and more people are likely to drink beyond their limits during this season than at other times of the year. Some will suffer adverse consequences that range from fights to falls to traffic crashes. Sadly, we often put ourselves and others at risk because we don't understand how alcohol affects us during an evening of celebratory drinking.

Despite the potential dangers, myths about drinking persists, which –for some- can prove fatal. Scientific studies supported by the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA) provide information that challenges these widespread, yet incorrect, beliefs about how quickly alcohol affects the body and how long the effects of drinking last.

Holiday party-goers may not recognize that critical decision-making abilities and driving-related skills are already diminished long before a person shows physical signs of intoxication.

Initially, alcohol acts as a stimulant, so people who drink may feel upbeat and excited. But don't be fooled. Alcohol soon decreases inhibitions and judgment, and can lead to reckless decisions.

As we consume more alcohol, reaction time suffers and behavior becomes poorly controlled and sometimes even aggressive – leading to fights and other types of violence. Continued drinking causes 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 in some cases pass out. At these levels, alcohol can also cause blackouts – which are periods of amnesia when a person does not remember what happened while he or she was intoxicated. The intoxicated person actively engages in behaviors like walking and talking, but does not create memories for these or other events that occur during the blackout. At very high levels, drinkers face the danger of life-threatening alcohol poisoning due to the suppression of vital life functions.

During an evening of drinking, it is also easy to misjudge how long alcohol's effects last. For example, many people believe that they will begin to sober up and be able to 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 finished. Even after someone stops drinking, alcohol in the stomach and intestine continues to enter the bloodstream, impairing judgment and coordination for hours. Of course, we don't intend to harm anyone when we celebrate during the holiday season. Yet, violence and 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 is 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.

This holiday season, do not underestimate the effects of alcohol. Don't believe you can beat them, or they may beat you.

ABOUT US...Since 1974, Chautauqua Alcohol & Substance Abuse Council (CASAC), a United Way partner agency, has provided prevention education and community awareness regarding alcohol and other drugs. CASAC is the only New York State Office of Alcoholism & Substance Abuse Services (OASAS) approved and supported alcohol and other drug prevention agency in Chautauqua County. For further information about CASAC's programs and services, call the Jamestown office at 664-3608, the Dunkirk office at 366-4623, or go to CASAC's website, www.casacweb.org.