

Hints for a safe New Year's Eve

SPECIAL TO FLORIDA WEEKLY

New Year's Eve parties and alcohol can be a deadly combination, officials with Southwest Florida Addiction Services warn.

"Alcohol consumption typically peaks during the holiday season. We're cautioning everyone to exercise good judgment and to be responsible if they choose to drink. There are many practical options available to partygoers," said Kevin B. Lewis, chief executive officer of Southwest Florida Addiction Services.

December also is Drunk and Drugged Driving Prevention Month and officials are expected to be on the alert for residents who drink and drive.

More than half of all traffic fatalities involve alcohol, according to the Lee County Sheriff's office. Mr. Lewis said alcohol abuse is a contributing factor for seven in 10 adults seeking treatment at SWFAS.

"Alcohol is a drug that depresses the central nervous system and causes sleepiness, lack of coordination and poor decision-making capabilities," Mr. Lewis said. "These effects are all harmful to our driving abilities."

In Florida, the illegal blood-alcohol level is .08 or higher.

"A person who weighs 140 pounds will reach that limit with three drinks in an hour. Because a person may not feel drunk, they may not realize that their reaction time and driving skills are measurably impaired," Mr. Lewis said. "Not eating properly, prescription and over the counter medications, and fatigue can all enhance the effect of alcohol on an individual."

Mr. Lewis said those hosting parties must take responsibility for their guests. That means having non-alcoholic beverages on hand for both designated drivers and drinkers, and plenty of food to reduce the absorption rate of alcohol into the system.

"Be sure and offer non-alcoholic alternatives to your friends who may attend a party, and remember that a good host won't let a guest drive away under the influence. Offer coffee and desserts to guests and minimize alcoholic drinks as the party winds down" Mr. Lewis offered.

Particularly vulnerable during this time of year may be adolescents with holiday time on their hands and the elderly who often feel isolated or depressed, Mr. Lewis added.

"All of us knowing persons in these categories need to pay special attention and find healthy holiday alternatives," he said.

SWFAS is Southwest Florida's most comprehensive substance abuse treatment and prevention program, serving 5,000 people per year from ages 9 to 90. It offers outpatient and residential programs for both adults and youth from nine locations throughout Lee and Hendry counties. In addition, SWFAS provides detoxification services for adults, prevention programming for all ages, and an Employee Assistance Program for about 60 Southwest Florida businesses.

SWFAS is not a free service. Fees are charged on a sliding scale, based on family income. In many cases, private insurance is accepted. SWFAS is a United Way agency in addition to being supported with funding from Lee County and the State of Florida. ■

About alcohol consumption

>>A 12-ounce can of beer, a 5-ounce glass of wine, and a 1.5-ounce shot of 80 proof hard liquor all contain the same amount of alcohol. Coffee, cold showers and exercise do not quicken sobriety. Each one-half ounce of alcohol takes the average body about one hour to process and eliminate. Only passage of time will free the body from the effects of alcohol.

If the choice is made to drink at a New Year's party

- >>Eat before drinking. Food in the stomach will slow down the rate of alcohol absorption into the bloodstream.
- >>Remember that fatigue and medications can impact how you respond to alcohol. Either of these can dramatically enhance the effect alcohol has on the drinker.
- >>Drink slowly, sip the drink and space drinks.
- >>Set a limit; don't exceed it.
- >>Stop while still in control.
- >>Don't let friends drive drunk. If you have not drunk any alcohol, drive your friend home or offer to call him or her a cab.
- >>Do not drive after drinking. Take turns being a designated non-drinking responsible driver.

Source: Southwest Florida Addiction Services and Americans for a Drug-Free America

Hosting a New Year's Eve party

- >>Always serve food. Protein-based items such as cheese, shrimp cocktails, spareribs, and pizza inhibit the absorption of alcohol into the bloodstream. Avoid thirst-provoking appetizers such as chips, pretzels, or other salty snacks.
- >>Serve food in waves to encourage frequent return trips back to the table. Or, pass food on trays circulated around the room.

>>Remember that unique and interesting foods encourage consumption.

>>Plan the event so that the focus is on people or events, and not on drinking. Plan an interesting program, social activity, or other entertainment.

>>If guests are charged a fee, separate the price of admission or food from the cost of the drinks. Do not force the non-drinkers to share the cost of alcoholic beverages.

>>Sign no contract with a caterer requiring a minimum amount of sales — such contracts might encourage excessive drinking.

>>Offer non-alcoholic beverages. Serve alcoholic drinks only upon request. Always have non-alcoholic beverages available for mixing as well as drinking.

>>If preparing alcoholic punch, use a non-carbonated base like fruit juice. Alcohol is absorbed faster into bloodstream with a carbonated base.

>>Control the flow of liquor by avoiding self-service bars.

>>Have bartenders adhere to strict serving guidelines: a) Measure correct amounts of liquor in drinks — no doubles, b) Do not serve individuals who appear to be impaired, c) Never serve minors.

>>Close the bar one hour before the end of the party and have non-alcoholic beverages (i.e., coffee, tea, soft drinks, and dessert) available at that time.

>>If a guest has been drinking, offer to drive him or her home — or call a cab. Keep numbers of several cab companies around.

>>Know what "safe ride" programs are available in your area.

Recruit people ahead of time who will not be drinking to help you make sure everyone has a safe ride home. Half of all fatal car accidents in Southwest Florida involve alcohol.

Source: Southwest Florida Addiction Services, Office for Substance Abuse Prevention, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, and the National Highway Traffic Administration of the Department of Transportation

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