



# The Safety Corner

From the Marine Corps Center for Lessons Learned  
November 21, 2006



## Alcohol Poisoning

This issue of the Safety Corner highlights the dangers associated with alcohol and how they affect our readiness to support operations in the War on Terror.

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### From the Director:

This issue of the Safety Corner is produced in coordination with Headquarters Safety Division in an attempt to stop a deadly trend in the Military. The loss of one Marine to any situation that we have the ability to control is unacceptable. All Marines have the responsibility to look out for their fellow Marines. A common theme in many of the Safety Corners is "Train as we Fight." We spend considerable effort in our combat training to ensure every Marine is equipped mentally and physically for any situation that might be encountered in combat. Marines are taught about the dangers of enemy actions and how to successfully face those hazards. The focus of this issue is to remind us of the hazards we create for ourselves.

The famous cartoon dad, Homer Simpson, once said, "Alcohol, the cause and solution to all of the worlds problems." It is unfortunate that some service members turn to alcohol as their answer for everything. Overhearing conversations on a payday Friday prior to liberty will run along a similar theme: "We are going to a bar later and drink," or "We are going to party." Some people also turn to alcohol to "drown out their sorrows". Whether it's Pre/Post Deployment stress or you just had a bad day - both are unacceptable. Talking to your buddies or seeking some help for post deployment issues is more effective than hitting the bottle.

In a previous issue of the Safety Corner, we discussed the importance of having a plan for liberty. If you want to drink, have a plan. Know your limit. It takes maturity to know when to stop drinking. You would not let a fellow Marine run into open machine gun fire or step on a booby trap. Have the courage to stop dangerous activities on liberty.

Some people laugh at the behavior of others who are drunk. Some think it's even funnier when they pass out. But there is nothing funny about the aspiration of vomit leading to asphyxiation or the poisoning of the respiratory center in the brain, both of which can result in death.

This is a little preachy and I know that but the fact is in fiscal year 2006 there were seven Marines who lost their lives due to drinking too much and dying from choking on their own vomit or from alcohol poisoning. These seven Marines are not included in the approximately twenty five Marines who died due to private motor vehicle accidents where alcohol may have been a contributing factor. The actual number has not been determined due to ongoing investigations.

I look forward to your comments, observations, and concerns.

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### Background

Tragically, the Marine Corps has lost seven Marines in FY06 and two in FY07 from drinking too much alcohol. These were young Marines with everything to live for, but they didn't realize that too much alcohol could kill them. They simply thought that no matter how much they drank, they could sleep it off and they'd wake up in the morning. No problem – right? WRONG; Unfortunately – DEAD WRONG. Alcohol depresses nerves that control involuntary actions such as breathing and the gag reflex (which prevents choking). A fatal dose of alcohol will eventually stop these functions.



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Heavy drinking can increase the risk for certain cancers, especially those of the liver, esophagus, throat, and larynx (voice box). Heavy drinking can also cause liver cirrhosis, immune system problems, brain damage, and harm to the fetus during pregnancy. In addition, drinking increases the risk of death from automobile crashes as well as recreational and on-the-job injuries. Furthermore, both homicides and suicides are more likely to be committed by people who have been drinking. In purely economic terms, alcohol-related problems cost society approximately \$185 billion per year. In human terms, the costs cannot be calculated.

You should also know that a person's blood alcohol concentration (BAC) can continue to rise *even while he or she is passed out*. Even after a person stops drinking, alcohol in the stomach and intestine continues to enter the bloodstream and circulate throughout the body. It is dangerous to assume the person will be fine by sleeping it off.

### ALCOHOL IMPAIRMENT CHART

NEVER DRINK AND DRIVE

| Drinks | APPROXIMATE BLOOD ALCOHOL PERCENTAGE |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |  |
|--------|--------------------------------------|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|--|
|        | Body Weight in Pounds                |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |  |
|        | 90                                   | 100 | 120 | 140 | 160 | 180 | 200 | 220 | 240 |     |  |
| 0      | .00                                  | .00 | .00 | .00 | .00 | .00 | .00 | .00 | .00 | .00 | ONLY SAFE DRIVING LIMIT                  |
| 1      | .05                                  | .05 | .04 | .03 | .03 | .03 | .02 | .02 | .02 | .02 | Impairment Begins                        |
| 2      | .10                                  | .09 | .08 | .07 | .06 | .05 | .05 | .04 | .04 | .04 | Driving Skills Affected                  |
| 3      | .15                                  | .14 | .11 | .10 | .09 | .08 | .07 | .06 | .06 | .06 | Possible Criminal Penalties              |
| 4      | .20                                  | .18 | .15 | .13 | .11 | .10 | .09 | .08 | .08 | .08 | Legally Intoxicated - Criminal Penalties |
| 5      | .25                                  | .23 | .19 | .16 | .14 | .13 | .11 | .10 | .09 | .09 |  |
| 6      | .30                                  | .27 | .23 | .19 | .17 | .15 | .14 | .12 | .11 | .11 | Legally Intoxicated - Criminal Penalties |
| 7      | .35                                  | .32 | .27 | .23 | .20 | .18 | .16 | .14 | .13 | .13 |  |
| 8      | .40                                  | .36 | .30 | .26 | .23 | .20 | .18 | .17 | .15 | .15 | Legally Intoxicated - Criminal Penalties |
| 9      | .45                                  | .41 | .34 | .29 | .26 | .23 | .20 | .19 | .17 | .17 |  |
| 10     | .51                                  | .45 | .38 | .32 | .28 | .25 | .23 | .21 | .19 | .19 | Legally Intoxicated - Criminal Penalties |

Your body can get rid of one drink per hour.  
Each 1½ oz. of 80 proof liquor, 12 oz. of beer or 5 oz. of table wine = 1 drink.

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### What Is Alcoholism?

Alcoholism, also known as "alcohol dependence," is a disease that includes four symptoms:

**Craving:** A strong need, or compulsion, to drink.

**Loss of control:** The inability to limit one's drinking on any given occasion.

**Physical dependence:** Withdrawal symptoms, such as nausea, sweating, shakiness, and anxiety, occur when alcohol use is stopped after a period of heavy drinking.

**Tolerance:** The need to drink greater amounts of alcohol in order to "get high."

People who are not alcoholic sometimes do not understand why an alcoholic can't just "use a little willpower" to stop drinking. However, alcoholism has little to do with willpower. Alcoholics are in the grip of a powerful "craving," or uncontrollable need, for alcohol that overrides their ability to stop drinking. This need can be as strong as the need for food or water.

### What Is Alcohol Abuse?

Alcohol abuse differs from alcoholism in that it does not include an extremely strong craving for alcohol, loss of control over drinking, or physical dependence. Alcohol abuse is defined as a pattern of drinking that results in one or more of the following situations within a 12-month period:

- Failure to fulfill major work, school, or home responsibilities;
- Drinking in situations that are physically dangerous, such as while driving a car or operating machinery;
- Having recurring alcohol-related legal problems, such as being arrested for driving under the influence of alcohol or for physically hurting someone while drunk; and/or
- Continued drinking despite having ongoing relationship problems that are caused or worsened by the drinking.

Although alcohol abuse is basically different from alcoholism, many effects of alcohol abuse are also experienced by alcoholics.



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It is common for someone who drinks an excessive amount of alcohol to vomit since alcohol is an irritant to the stomach. This, in turn, creates the danger of choking on vomit, which could cause death by asphyxiation in a person who is not conscious because of intoxication.

There are people that are fully alcoholics, there are those that simply abuse alcohol, there are those that are "binge drinkers", but all can be effected by alcohol poisoning. Below are some signs to watch for and be aware of to prevent yourself or your friends from becoming victims of just such a tragedy:

### Critical Signs for Alcohol Poisoning

- Mental confusion, stupor, coma, or person cannot be roused.
- Vomiting.
- Seizures.
- Slow breathing (fewer than eight breaths per minute).
- Irregular breathing (10 seconds or more between breaths).
- Hypothermia (low body temperature), bluish skin color, paleness.

### What Should I Do If I Suspect Someone Has Alcohol Poisoning?

- Know the danger signals.
- Do not wait for all symptoms to be present.
- Be aware that a person who has passed out may die.
- If there is any suspicion of an alcohol overdose, call 911 for help. Don't try to guess the level of drunkenness.

### What Can Happen to Someone With Alcohol Poisoning That Goes Untreated?

- Victim chokes on his or her own vomit.
- Breathing slows, becomes irregular, or stops.
- Heart beats irregularly or stops.
- Hypothermia (low body temperature).
- Hypoglycemia (too little blood sugar) leads to seizures.

Untreated severe dehydration from vomiting can cause seizures, permanent brain damage, or death. Even if the victim lives, an alcohol overdose can lead to irreversible brain damage.

Rapid binge drinking (which often happens on a bet or a dare) is especially dangerous because the victim can ingest a fatal dose before becoming unconscious.

Don't be afraid to seek medical help for a friend who has had too much to drink. Don't worry that your friend may become angry or embarrassed-remember, you cared enough to help.

***Always be safe, not sorry.***

### What to do?

Discuss any concerns you may have about drinking-related problems with your unit Substance Abuse Councilor.

In our society, the myth prevails that an alcohol problem is a sign of moral weakness. As a result, you may feel that to seek help is to admit some type of shameful defect in yourself. In fact, alcoholism is a disease that is no more a sign of weakness than is asthma. Moreover, taking steps to identify a possible drinking problem has an enormous payoff-a chance for a healthier, more rewarding life.

The observations and recommendations contained in The Marine Corps Center for Lessons Learned (MCCLL) Safety Corner represent the considered judgment of Marines who have identified safety issues in their units. The purpose of this newsletter is to apprise other Marines of these safety recommendations and to encourage them to enter their own lessons into the Marine Corps Lessons Management System (LMS).