Binge drinking: What's your limit?

by Nicole Gifford

As post-secondary institutions across Canada welcome students back for another academic year, the need for alcohol-related awareness campaigns has come into focus.

The City of Fredericton recently began a "Public Education Campaign" targeting alcohol-related behaviour. The campaign includes posters and coasters to be distributed in bars throughout the city, as well as radio and newspaper advertisements. According to a press release the aim is to present "a clear message outlining personal responsibility related to alcohol use."

The idea is not to discourage drinking, but to encourage responsible drinking.

The National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism states that a safe level of drinking - without the risk of alcohol-related injury or illness - is "up to two drinks per day for men and one per day for women and older people."

According to a feature article in this month's issue of reader's Digest, 'binge drinking' is defined as: "consuming five or more drinks for a man and four or more drinks for a woman on a single occasion."

The occurrence of binge drinking, especially among those aged 15-25, has increased over the last decade, whereas the use of illicit drugs has declined. A 2000 Canadian Campus Survey found that 63 percent of students had consumed five or more drinks in a single sitting in the previous year. Because of the increased risks related to binge drinking, as opposed to moderate drinking, this number is tough to ignore.

While only approximately five percent of Canadians are alcohol-dependant, a 2003 Canadian Community Health Survey found that 20.7 percent of Canadians aged 12 and over binged on alcohol 12 or more times a year.

The Reader's Digest feature cites, "Whatever the age, binge drinking puts a person at much higher risk of death or injuries from motor vehicle crashes, falls, drowning and other hazards of poor judgment and reduced coordination. Violence, vandalism, sexual assault, unprotected sexual encounters with the risk of unplanned pregnancy or infection from sexually transmitted diseases all increase."

As well, "drinking to intoxication seems to be particularly associated with poorer functioning on tests of learning and memory and on visual-spatial tasks such as doing a puzzle," said Susan Tapert, associate professor of psychiatry at the University of California, in an interview for Reader's Digest.

Alcohol is a central nervous system depressant, so drinking too much too fast can shut down key bodily functions like gag reflexes, breathing, heart rate, and brain function. Choking on vomit, lapsing into a coma, or suffering from cardiac arrest can all result from over-consumption.

A 1999 survey by Harvard University's School of Public Health found binge drinkers 21 times more likely than non-binge drinkers to: miss class, fall behind in school work, damage property, get hurt or injured, engage in unplanned sexual activity, not use protection when having sex, get in trouble with campus police, and to drive a car after drinking.

The study also found a number of unwanted impacts - such as property damage, assault, and unwanted sexual encounters - on other students and members of the community.

As well, there are risks associated with binge drinking to be considered by party hosts. If you serve alcohol to someone who is intoxicated and that person harms themselves or others, you are at risk of being sued. Even if you serve no alcohol, you could be liable for injuries sustained by someone who is drunk while on your property.

Regardless of these risks, students continue to binge drink. Most have an idea of what binge drinking is and the risks associated, however many consume five or more drinks each time they go out. The percentage of Canadians between ages 20-24 who binge drink 12 or more times a year is more than double the national average at 41.4 percent.

That's why at this time of year many organizations push to educate the public on the consequences of irresponsible drinking.

Organizations such as MADD (Mothers Against Drunk Driving) Canada lobby for such proactive measures as setting minimum prices for drinks in bars, raising the drinking age to 21, and lowering the driving-impaired limit to 0.05 blood alcohol concentration.

In the end, however, it is up to students to know their own limits and remain within them.

With files from Reader's Digest and The Center for Science in the Public Interest, and The National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism.



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Party-goers (from left:) Tyler Ehrhardt, Pat Lenehan, Brad Carrier, Tim Moore, Kiel Graham. and Kathleen Bowie seen here binge drinking, on Saturday night at a house party on Albert St. Binge drinking is typically defined as consuming five or more drinks for a man and four or more drinks for a woman on a single occasion. And these folks appear to have consumed in excess of the 'safe level of drinking' as defined by The N.I.A.A.A.

PERCENTAGE OF BINGE DRINKERS, 12 OR MORE TIMES A YEAR:

	1994	1998	2003
Total, 12 years and over	13.9	19.5	20.7
12-14 years	-	-	4.2
15-19 years	18.2	33.3	30.5
20-24 years	23.8	37.9	41.4
25-34 years	17.9	23.0	26.3
35-44 years	13.5	18.3	20.9
45-54 years	12.9	16.7	17.6
55-64 years	10.1	12.1	13.1
65-74 years	5.4	6.3	7.2
75 years and over	-	2.1	2.5

Source: Canadian Community Health Survey, 1994-2003 (Statistics Canada)

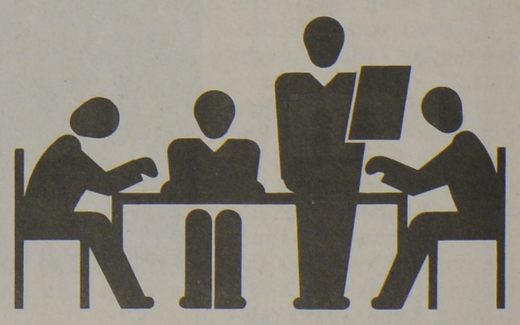
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