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The Careful Drinker

When booze myths meet sobering truths

Whether it's unwinding from a long, stressful week at work or celebrating a milestone birthday, alcohol is usually the party favor of choice. But before you reach for the bottle opener, take a swig of booze basics from David Craig, biochemistry professor at Hobart and William Smith Colleges in Geneva and director of the school's alcohol education project.

By Theresa Juva
Contributing writer

Myth No. 1: Males and females respond the same to alcohol if they weigh the same.

Sobering Truth: Craig said because women have a higher percentage of body fat, even if they weigh the same as a male, the alcohol stays more concentrated in their bodies. Men have more water tissues that can absorb the alcohol. Craig also said variations in a woman's hormonal levels can make the effects of the alcohol greater.

Myth No. 2: If you don't "feel" drunk, you are OK to drive.

Sobering Truth: Craig said this is a myth because the first effect of alcohol is judgment impairment. A person who has been drinking cannot accurately gauge how "drunk" they are. Craig said because people can't rely on their own perceptions, it is dangerous for them to decide they can drive.

Barry Weiss, the coordinator of the Onondaga County STOP DWI program, said stronger local enforcement of drinking and driving laws has reduced the number of alcohol-related deaths. Before the law was passed in the 1980s, there were 38 to 50 alcohol-related deaths in Onondaga County, and in 2005 there were nine, Weiss said. He said it is important that people make a plan for getting home before they start drinking.

Myth No. 3: College kids are the most reckless with drinking.

Sobering Truth: While alcohol consumption is the greatest among college students compared to older adults or adults the same age not in college, students are responsible with their habits, Craig said.

In a study Craig conducted on the campus of Hobart and William Smith Colleges, he found that "the overwhelming majority of kids actually have healthy attitudes about drinking." Part of the study included sampling students on school nights by giving a Breathalyzer test. Results showed that from Sunday through Thursday, 80 percent of students had no alcohol in their systems.

The reason many students consume more than they think is healthy is because they overestimate how much

Our expert



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Geneva, director of Hobart and William Smith Colleges' alcohol education project, where he specializes in the physiological effects of alcohol, alcohol abuse prevention on college campuses and among athletes.

Not your typical 101 class: Craig uses himself as a subject in many of his studies. He gives a lecture several times a year where he takes shots of scotch-whiskey on an empty stomach every 15 minutes to demonstrate and measure the effects of alcohol. Students watch what happens if they chug too quickly at happy hour after skipping lunch.

Most dangerous drink: Mixed drinks, such as a Long Island iced tea, contain more than one shot, so one glass is actually two or three drinks. "People aren't aware of what they are getting. Sometimes bartenders think they are doing you a favor."

Best piece of advice before a night out: Remember that not everyone experiences the same amount of alcohol in the same way. "People need to realize and respect (other) people's limitations." That means not rallying for a friend to guzzle the rest of a beer if they don't want it.

Future area of study: Researching the link between blood alcohol level and young people's ability to recognize how much they are impaired. "More often than not, people think their blood alcohol level is lower than what it is." This is a huge factor in whether someone will decide to drive.

their peers are drinking, Craig said. Students believe their peers are drinking up to four times more than what they are actually consuming, which makes them drink more than they think they should.

Myth No. 4: Frequent stops to the restroom, drinking caffeine or sweating helps get you sober.

Sobering Truth: The kidneys try to

eliminate the alcohol, but actually remove very little, Craig said. Even though many party-goers hope that tearing up the dance floor will "sweat out" the alcohol or drinking coffee will perk them up, Craig said only time will make them sober. The liver is in charge of metabolizing the alcohol and only this process can lower a person's blood alcohol content.

Craig said it's drinking on an empty stomach that guarantees a person will get drunk quickly.

Myth No. 5: Alcohol is not as dangerous as illegal drugs, such as cocaine and heroine.

Sobering Truth: Alcohol contributes to not only car accidents, but also other injuries and accidents. Craig said 25 percent of hospital admissions are alcohol related. In 2003, nearly 20,000 deaths were alcohol induced (excluding accidents and homicides).

But alcohol continues to be most dangerous when mixed with driving. According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, in 2002 an estimated 11 million people reported driving under the influence of an illicit drug while 1 in 7 Americans, or more than 33 million people, reported driving under the influence of alcohol in the last year.

Craig said the legality of alcohol does not make it safer.

Myth No. 6: Because alcohol laws are more stringent in the U.S. than in Europe, young adults tend to drink more and develop more drinking problems later in life.

Sobering Truth: Alcohol may be more socially visible in European countries, but Craig said a relaxed attitude does not mean there aren't problems.

"The French have a lot of drinking problems," he said. They tend to drink throughout the day, which can lead to dependency.

Italians generally supplement their wine-drinking with a meal and have healthier habits, Craig said.

Some believe that since the drinking age in the United States was raised to 21 in 1984, drinking would become even more attractive to teenagers. But, since the age was raised, there was a "dramatic drop" in deaths among high school students, Craig said.