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Members of the Garrison Command team, the Army Substance Abuse Prevention program, and post law enforcement stand near a car that was driven by a drunk driver. The driver, who had a beer between his legs, crashed his car around 1:30 in the morning, slamming into numerous trees before coming to a stop. He was

pronounced dead at the scene.

Let this serve as a strong reminder not to drink and drive.

For many people alcohol use is a normal and enjoyable part of the holiday experience. On behalf of the Army Substance Abuse Program (ASAP), here are some things to consider to lower or eliminate your risk for driving under the influence (DUI). (NOTE: I am focusing primarily on alcohol in this article. I will address marijuana and other drug use in a separate article.)

I see a common reaction when I talk to people about the risk of getting a DUI: “That will never happen to me.” I can happily say that most people are correct. Unfortunately, prior to getting a DUI most offenders had that same thought. In my work as a substance abuse counselor with the Army, I see three categories of offenders:

1. **The classic alcoholic.** This is the person you would most expect to get a DUI. They often drink daily, typically heavily, and in some cases need alcohol to feel normal or avoid withdrawals. They often have multiple DUI offenses.
2. **The “I felt fine” offender.** This person has a high tolerance for alcohol, either through habitual

use of alcohol or from having the “right” genetics. This means they are able to drink a fair amount of alcohol without exhibiting the outward effects. When it comes time to get home after a night out they are more likely to drive because they “feel fine.”

3. **The “morning after” offender.** This person drinks lots of alcohol on a particular evening, then goes to sleep for a few hours. They wake up feeling refreshed if not a little groggy and hop in the car to go to work or home. They do not realize that their blood-alcohol concentration (BAC) is still above the legal limit because for each drink they consume it takes one hour or more to fully process that alcohol.

As you can see, alcoholics are not the only people who get DUIs. Therefore, thinking you are not at risk because you don’t have a drinking problem is incorrect. Here are some modest proposals for each of the three categories presented above:

1. If you are a daily drinker, especially if you drink more than two standard drinks (defined as 1 12-ounce 5% beer, one 5-ounce glass of wine, or 1 1.5 ounce shot of hard liquor, consider slowing down or stopping. If you can’t, go talk to someone about developing a plan. (NOTE: Shakes, sweats, or trouble sleeping are signs of withdrawals, which can lead to seizures or even death. Do NOT stop cold turkey. Consult a physician before doing anything.)
2. If you are someone who has a high tolerance because you enjoy drinking alcohol and do so on a fairly regular basis or because you have the “right” genetics, take extra precautions. You are potentially the highest risk for a DUI even if you don’t think so because you probably haven’t had any trouble related to your alcohol use and you can “hold your liquor.” Chances are you can still largely control your alcohol use. Great! Be conscious of limiting the frequency and amounts you drink, or at least change up your drinking routine. With routines come complacency, and with complacency comes lack of attention to detail (such as whether you had 3 beers or 5 beers at the party). If you are going to a place where you know you will be drinking, don’t rely on how you feel after the party. Bring a trusted friend or spouse who you know will drink zero alcohol.
3. If you don’t drink often but occasionally drink heavily on a particular evening (please, I discourage you from doing so – it’s terrible for your brain health and sets you up for other unwanted problems as well), give yourself time. More time than you think you need. You may feel better the next morning, but your blood doesn’t really care how you feel, it only knows how much alcohol you’ve had and that it’s still working to get it out of your system.

Other general precautions you can take include spacing drinks at least one hour apart; alternating water or non-alcoholic beverages between drinks; and eating before and during your use of alcohol. However, keep in mind that generally accepted health guidelines are no more than 1 drink per day for women, and 2 per day for men. Finally, keep in mind that prescription and over-the-counter medications can impact the way your body absorbs alcohol. Read medication instructions carefully and if you aren’t sure, it’s best not to mix alcohol and medication.

As you can see, anyone who enjoys alcohol and then gets behind the wheel is at risk for a DUI during the holidays. In 2015, Cumberland County, PA had 1,126 DUI cases. That’s about 3 per day! Not all

of these people are alcoholics. Anyone can get a DUI. Take precautions. Make a plan and stick to it: no driving after any amount of alcohol.

We here at the ASAP wish you a safe and Merry Christmas and Happy Holidays. For questions about this article or substance use in general, feel free to call us at 245-4694.

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