

Alcohol Poisoning

In 1984 a federal law required all states to set 21 as the legal age for purchase or public possession of alcohol beverages. States that did not comply would lose a portion of their federal highway construction funding. The federal law was tied to highway construction funding because of the overwhelming evidence that lower drinking ages result in significantly higher motor vehicle fatalities involving young drivers. Since that time, many traffic safety organizations, including Remove Intoxicated Drivers (RID), have taken a leadership role in supporting efforts to increase compliance with the drinking age laws. Increased awareness about alcohol poisoning can play a key role in the prevention of underage drinking.

Knowing the Facts Can Save Lives

Until the 1990's, deaths due to alcohol poisoning were largely ignored by the media. Families who lost a child due to AOD (alcohol overdose) suffered in silence. College campuses, where a great many of the deaths occurred, sought to avoid adverse publicity. Death certificates said "cardiac arrest" or "asphyxiation." Medical examiners sometimes chose to tell a grieving family, "It was a freak accident," rather than "Your son/daughter drank him/herself to death."

In 1994, a Federal law was passed requiring colleges to publish all student deaths. Finally, these tragic AOD stories are in newspapers and on national television; stories like the one about a 16-year-old cheerleader in Illinois who died after drinking a bottle of schnapps on a friend's dare.

Remove Intoxicated Drivers (RID) began working on the problem of AOD in 1992. Based on discussions with victims' families and county medical examiners, RID estimates as many as 4,000 deaths occur each year from alcohol overdosing: drinking too much alcohol too fast. Families learn, in the most difficult way, that alcohol can be a lethal drug.



Teenagers are particularly vulnerable to AOD. Of the first 8 cases RID discovered, half were 16 years old or younger. At least half were first-time drinkers and had never been drunk before. Five were put to bed by friends or their own parents to "sleep it off," only to be found dead in the morning. Their friends or parents didn't know that if a person drinks too much alcohol quickly before falling asleep, the alcohol will shut down breathing and heart functions and kill a person within a few hours.

Until now, the lack of public information about AOD has been a national failure. The following information literally saves lives. It could save a friend or maybe even you.

Teens pictured in this piece died from alcohol poisoning.



U.S. Department of Transportation

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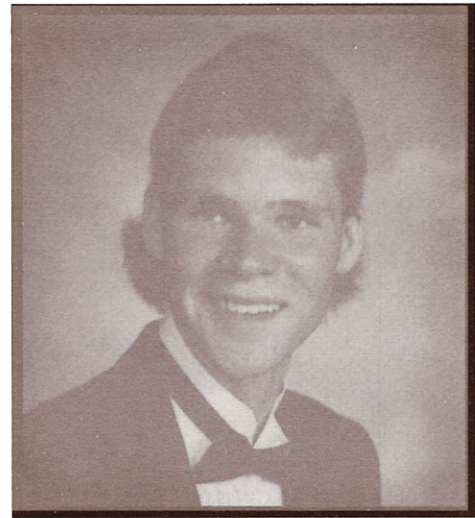
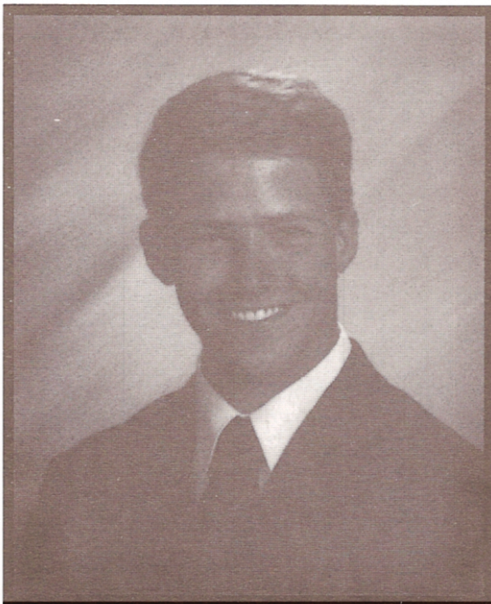
Mechanisms of alcohol poisoning

Alcohol depresses nerves that control involuntary actions such as breathing, the heart beat, and the gag reflex (prevents choking). A fatal dose of alcohol will eventually stop these functions. After the victim stops drinking, the heart keeps beating, and alcohol in the stomach continues to enter the bloodstream and circulate throughout the body.

As a result, the following can happen:

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

Even if the victim lives, AOD 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.



Critical signs for alcohol poisoning:

- Mental confusion, stupor, coma, or person cannot be roused
- No response to pinching the skin
- Vomiting while sleeping
- Seizures
- Slow breathing (less than 8 breaths per minute)
- Irregular breathing (10 seconds or more between breaths)
- Hypothermia (low body temperature), bluish skin color, paleness

Many people try different methods to reverse the effects of alcohol to become sober. Most of these methods are myths, and **they don't work.**

Some common myths:

- Drinking black coffee
- Taking a cold bath or shower
- Sleeping it off
- Walking it off

If you suspect that someone may have ingested a fatal dose of alcohol, help is required immediately:

- Call 911 or the emergency medical number.
- Stay with the victim.
- Keep the victim from choking on vomit.
- Tell emergency medical technicians the symptoms and, if you know, how much alcohol the victim drank. Prompt action may save the life of a friend, or your own.

When medical personnel arrive, they should:

- Protect the airway. This usually means inserting a tube into the trachea to protect it from vomit. Turning the victim on his/her side is not sufficient protection.
- Administer oxygen.
- Monitor breathing, and place victim on respirator if necessary.
- Monitor glucose and other levels in blood.
- Administer medication if convulsions are present.



Some conventional treatments do not work for AOD:

- Pumping the stomach
- Syrup of Ipecac to induce vomiting
- Activated charcoal
- Narcan (to reverse the effects of the central nervous system depressant)

Bystanders (friends, parents, strangers) have a responsibility:

- Know the danger signals (see “Critical Signs” section).
- 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 AOD, call 911 or the emergency number for help. Don't try to guess the level of drunkenness.

What you can do – A call to action

- Write letters to your local editor using this information the next time you notice a news story about an underage drinking incident or underage impaired driving crash.
- Encourage your school principal to present programs on alcohol awareness in health classes.
- Refuse to host underage drinking parties.
- Take part in the RID county survey of alcohol-related deaths.

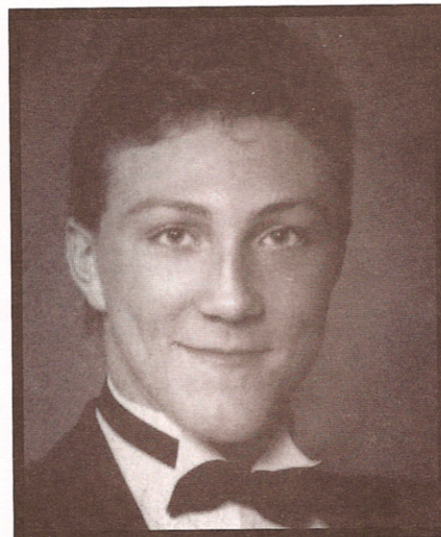
For more information about alcohol poisoning, write or fax questions to:

RID-USA, Inc.
P.O. Box 520
Schenectady, NY 12301
Fax: (518) 370-4917

RID Celebrates Twentieth Anniversary, February 1998

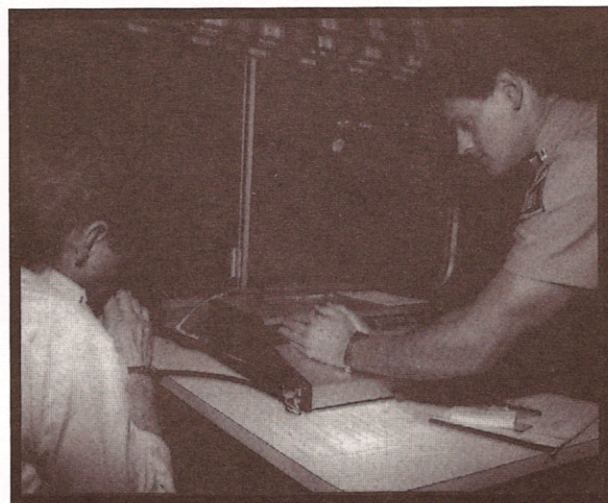
Twenty years ago, RID began a successful but lonely confrontation with the legal system's handling of impaired drivers in New York. In 1980, RID enabled the passage of laws curtailing plea bargaining, test refusals, leaving the scene of personal injury crashes, and placing self-funding enforcement measures in every county, along with other legislation that had been vetoed for years.

RID's efforts supported a 23 percent drop in alcohol-related fatalities from 1981 to 1986, the best record in the nation for that period. New York and Utah still have the best last-3-year record in deterring fatal crashes, and under 25 percent of the reported road fatalities were due to legally intoxicated drivers.



Other Milestones Initiated by RID:

- Comparative court audits on DWI sentencing
- Victim impact statements read in open court at sentencing
- Court-ordered victim impact panels
- Anti-DWI citizen action manual *How Can I Help?* SNAP Campaign (Sane National Alcohol Policy)



BUCKLE UP TENNESSEE There's Just Too Much To Lose.

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For Info Call: 1-800.99BELTS

www.tntrafficsafety.org

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