The Fatal 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 swing 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 Therese Java

**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're not drinking 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.

Busty Weiss, the coordinator of the Onondaga County STOP DRT program, said stronger local enforcement of drunk driving laws has reduced the number of alcohol-related deaths. Before the law was passed in the 1980s, there were 18-20 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 the age group 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 Beathalyzer test. Results showed that from Sunday through Thursday, 80 percent of students had no alcohol in their systems. The mean most students consume more than they think is healthy because they underestimate how much.

By Tereasa Java

**Our expert**

**Name:** David Craig
**Age:** 56
**Residence:** Canandaigua
**Job:** Biochemistry professor at Hobart and William Smith Colleges in Geneva, director of Hobart and William Smith Colleges' alcohol education project, where he specializes in the physiologic effects of alcohol, alcohol abuse and counseling college campuses and among students.

**Not your typical 101 class:** Craig uses himself as a subject in many of his studies. He's given a vitamin-mineral cocktail that keeps alcohol from depleting vitamin in an empty stomach every 15 minutes to see how much it reduces the effects of alcohol. Students watch what happens if they drug themselves at happy hour after drinking lump.

**Most dangerous drink:** Mixed drinks, such as a Long Island Iced Tea, contain more than one shot, so one glass is usually too much for three drinks. "People aren't aware of what they are getting." Sometimes barkeeps think they are getting served drinks they aren't.

**Best piece of advice before a night out:** Remember that not every drinker experiences the same amount of alcohol in the same way. "People need to realize and respect when people's limits are. That means not talking to a friend for a puzzle of the rest of a beer if they don't want it."

**Future area of study:** Researching the role between blood alcohol level and young people's ability to recognize how much they are required. "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 or not.

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

**Sobering Truth:** The kidneys try to eliminate the alcohol, but actually increase severity very little, Craig said. Even though many party-goers hope that tearing up the dance floor will "soothe" 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 heroin.**

**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 (including accidents and homicides). But alcohol continues to be the most dangerous when mixed with driving. According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, in 2002 an estimated 31 million people reported driving under the influence of alcohol while 1 to 7 Americans, or more than 33 million people, reported driving under the influence of alcohol in the last year.

Craig said the legalization 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.**

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