

## **Drinking to your Health at Christmas**

The street-lights drive the point home forcefully, flashing out the message that none but the deeply comatose can miss – Christmas is round the corner. Not that they need to, of course, because the air is full of expectation anyway, what with people making plans for the holidays, relatives dropping subtle and not-so-subtle hints about what they happen to need or fancy most, carols and pop songs associated with the Season wafting through the air practically wherever you go, and reminders everywhere about the need to stock up for the forthcoming revelries with masses of food ...and booze.

Ah, the booze. What would Christmas be like without alcohol, lots and lots of it? It is the ultimate social lubricant for gatherings, the cherry (dipped in brandy) on the cake of the celebrations, practically the real reason for the season – at least for some. So what? A bit of excess never really hurt anyone, has it? Well, almost no-one. We'll drink to the limit...and slightly beyond, whatever the representatives of that loathsome Nanny state, and the spirit-dampening newspaper articles say. After all, Christmas comes only once a year.

Who is to define excess, anyway? It depends on the individual, doesn't it? Alcohol can be good for your heart, after all. That's what the magazine articles and those little snippets in the papers and in magazines often remind us. The doctor actually prescribed a glass of red wine to my father when tests showed he had cholesterol. That proves it's actually good for you, doesn't it? Why all the negative talk about alcohol, as if it really was the devil's own brew? Blooming kill joys, the whole lot of them.

Actually, this is not an attempt at demonising drink, but simply a desire to point out that one can enjoy drinking at Christmas without doing harm to oneself, being a nuisance or endangering others. Alcohol *is* a drug, no doubt about it, but it has been used by men in virtually all types of societies in most parts of the world, and is likely to be still around come the end of times. Most people use it sensibly – most of the time - and it provides a living for millions round the world who are engaged in growing its raw materials, brewing it, distilling it, transporting it...or selling it. So it would not make much sense to try and eradicate it from the face of the earth, unless one is prepared to unleash a set of reactions which would destabilise societies over large parts of the globe.

We all agree that the problem lies in the misuse of alcohol. Can we define that, or is it simply a matter for the individual to find out for himself what constitutes abuse?

### **The Facts**

Scientific research and experience do point towards a level below which drinking can be considered safe for most people, and above which one is, at the very least, courting trouble. The amount is commonly denominated in units of alcohol.

A unit of alcohol is equivalent to between 8 and 10 grams of absolute alcohol, roughly the amount contained in a half-pint bottle of beer, a small glass of wine and a (bar) shot of spirits. According to many medical authorities, if an adult male sticks to 21 of these units of alcohol in a week, and if an adult woman does not exceed 14 units per week no great harm should ensue. Some provisos apply:

- ✚ Pregnant women, or those who think they could be pregnant, should drink very, very little or, preferably, not at all. Anything more than *one single unit of alcohol every now and then* is risky. Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders and are very real, life-long consequences (on the hapless baby) of drinking during pregnancy. These disorders (retardation, in layman's language) are entirely avoidable if one abstains from alcohol when pregnant.
- ✚ People on certain medications should not drink at all. Alcohol should never mix with certain types of antibiotics and sedatives - particularly Valium, Ativan and related medication - and a number of other tablets. If you are on *any sort* of medication, consult with a doctor or pharmacist, before drinking.
- ✚ Never drink more than 4 units in one session. Space them out as much as you can, and have water or non-alcoholic drinks in between. Don't drink on an empty stomach.
- ✚ Alcohol-dependent individuals should drink no alcohol at all.
- ✚ The size of a drink can mislead. Wine, for example, is much stronger than it was, say, 20 years ago. 13% ABV (alcohol by volume) bottles of wine are common these days, and each contains close to 10 units ...that's about 2 ½ times more than the sensible limit. Cans of beer often contain 50 cils at 5% ABV...that's 2 ½ units each. So be careful.

Remember, the suggested number of units of alcohol described above hold good for adults. Those who are not yet eighteen should be even more careful, and drink well under those limits – if at all. As for the under 16's – forget it. Not only is it foolhardy to drink alcohol - a toxin with highly damaging effects on growing bodies and developing personalities – it is now illegal for any person under 16 to buy, possess or drink alcohol in a public place. So, one way of risking ruining your Christmas is actually to give in to the temptation to drink alcohol.....

### **Drinking and Driving**

Drinking and driving deserves special attention. The breathalyser -test is now part of our lives, more so at Christmas. Since 1998, the year it was introduced, the number of fatal accidents at this time has fallen dramatically, compared to previous years, when car accidents would claim the lives of at least one person (often more) every year at Christmas-time.

The evidence that drinking is heavily implicated in car accidents of all sorts, including those resulting in death or serious injury is overwhelming. In virtually every country where the breathalyser was introduced, the number of deaths declined with immediate effect. Even the lowering of an already existing blood alcohol limit has seen death-rates from car accidents diminish.

Drivers would do well to keep in mind the simple injunction: “If you’re drinking don’t drive, if you’re driving don’t drink”. While a single unit of alcohol will not raise your Blood Alcohol Level over the legal limit, we all should be aware that even small amounts of alcohol (a single unit of alcohol, for example) will affect our reflexes, our peripheral vision and our judgement – all essential for safe driving. If we intend to drive at any time during the festive period with so many inebriated drivers in the streets, then it is especially important to keep our head when all about us are losing theirs, as it were. The degree of need to be stone-cold sober rises in proportion to the level of danger lurking in the streets.

If we are caught driving with an elevated blood alcohol level, we will have to face some very unpleasant consequences: a fine of at least Lm200 and a six-month suspension of our driving licence- if it’s our first offence. If it’s at least our second, the fine rises to Lm500, and we won’t be able to drive for one whole year. Moreover, it’s not a question of hoping the magistrate will turn out to be a sporting type who will turn a blind eye on our misdemeanours, and just let us off with a stern telling-off because it was Christmas time. The fine and suspension of licence are mandatory – the Court will *have* to impose both if we are found with an elevated level of alcohol on our system while driving.

Much worse than the fine and the suspension of the driving licence, would be the horrible consequences to be faced if we do have an accident, and we’re not the ones who are killed in the process. Can we imagine what it would be like to live with the knowledge we may have caused, or contributed to, the death of, or the permanent injury to, someone just because we decided we wanted to drink and drive, rather than take a taxi? Psychological ghosts would haunt us in all Christmases yet to come.

### **The Law**

It is illegal for you to sell, buy, serve or supply alcohol to a person under 16 years of age. You are liable to be prosecuted and penalized.

It is illegal for you who are under 16, to drink alcohol, be in possession of alcohol, obtain or try to obtain alcohol. You may be arraigned in court, and if found guilty, you may be fined, or ordered to participate in a specific educational programme for young people.

For you parents or guardians, if a person below the age of 16 who is in your care is drinking, is in possession of alcohol, or tries to obtain alcohol, and this offence could have been avoided had you exercised due diligence, you may be subject to a penalty.

This law applies to all public places.

There is no reason why we should not celebrate Christmas with a drink or two. But anything over that could be harmful to us....and perhaps to others. So we can go out and celebrate, but keep in mind that we don't need even to get merry to have a happy Christmas.

Article provided by Manuel Mangani, Service Manager, Alcohol Services, Sedqa

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