

Drinking too much can quickly ruin holiday season

By Carolyn Butler, Washington Post

'Tis definitely the season to eat, drink and be merry. Some of us, however, take those festive guidelines a wee bit too seriously – particularly with eggnog, mulled wine, champagne and other alcoholic beverages.

Why do people drink too much during the holidays?

“A lot of traditions at this time of year involve alcohol,” says Virginia clinical psychologist Diane Hoekstra. “You’re with friends and family who you may not see all the time, and you really want to have a good time, and so you celebrate with a few drinks, which isn’t harmful as long as you’re aware of your limits.” Unfortunately, that can be more difficult when you’re not used to drinking a lot, as well as when you’re guzzling seasonal cocktails that you’re not particularly accustomed to.

“Most of us don’t drink Champagne or cognac or eggnog on a regular basis,” explains Daniel Z. Lieberman, a professor of psychiatry and behavioral sciences at George Washington University. “I may know that three to four beers is my limit, but I have no idea what it is with brandy or eggnog, so it’s possible to lose track much more easily.”

The strife and strain that often build during the holidays can also play a role in overdrinking. “Sometimes you’re at parties or getting together with extended family that maybe people don’t necessarily feel totally comfortable with, and drinking is a way to grease those wheels a little bit,” says Lieberman. “There is so much pressure to be happy during the holidays, so much pressure to be with loved ones, that if you’re going through a difficult time, like with a divorce or a loss or you

don't have someone in your life at this period of time, it's really magnified."

Hoekstra agrees, adding that mental health concerns, stress and distress all go up during the holidays because of family conflicts, financial concerns and any number of other issues, especially for those with preexisting depression. "Unfortunately, many people medicate their pain or depression with alcohol, or use it as a potential stress release," she says. "I often see people who don't have a real alcohol problem drinking and doing things they wouldn't normally do at this time of year."

While it may seem as though the only consequence of too much eggnog is the occasional pounding hangover at work or at the holiday pageant at your kid's school, boozing can have serious ramifications, starting with the documented uptick in drunken driving accidents and fatalities in the Christmas/New Year's period.

Beyond that, Lieberman notes that frequent drinking on the holiday party circuit can run your body down and hamper immunity during cold and flu season, not to mention damage your liver in the long term. Hoekstra adds that another major concern is getting so blitzed at an office holiday celebration that you say or do something you regret.

"Your judgment is seriously impaired when drinking, which I think we all know can lead someone to engage in appalling, embarrassing, inappropriate behaviors that have potentially dangerous repercussions on the job, especially with [the rise of] Facebook and other social media," she says.

Boozing can also play a role in holiday weight gain. Registered dietitian Cheryl Harris, of Harris Whole Health in Alexandria, points out that a glass of wine has approximately 100 calories, while many mixed drinks are in the 200-to-300-calorie range and eggnog is 400 or so calories per glass.

“It adds up pretty quickly,” she says, noting that there’s also a “tendency to forget about all your other food plans after you’ve had a few,” and thus to binge on Christmas cookies, pigs in blankets or whatever other goodies are in front of you.

For anyone who’s interested in trying to curtail their cocktail habit this Christmas or beyond, Harris offers a few simple tips that work no matter what your motivation for cutting back:

- Alternate sparkling water (or something else nonalcoholic) with any alcohol you consume.
- Go for a wine spritzer, or add ice to wine or other drinks. You’ll feel as though you’re having more alcohol than you actually are, and you’ll be drinking at a slower pace.
- Figure out beforehand how many drinks you will actually enjoy without feeling lousy the next day. It’s easier to say no when you know that the third rum punch will give you a nasty hangover.
- After setting a drink quota for the night, spread them out over the course of the evening.
- Don’t make drinking the focus of your partygoing. Choose something else, such as dancing, catching up with friends or taking pictures.
- Have a distinctly flavored hard candy in your mouth whenever you don’t want to be drinking. Since flavors such as peppermint and cinnamon would taste atrocious with most alcoholic beverages, it will be an easy reminder that you’ve decided to stop.
- Always have some of what you love. Studies have shown that when people know they are not allowed to have a certain food, cravings for that food increase. So even though eggnog is a

calorie and fat bomb, have a small cup and enjoy it fully if that's what makes your holiday season complete, and then skip something else.