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Drinking and most things don't mix

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The debilitating effects of alcohol have been documented for centuries—a passage in an Egyptian papyrus from 1500 B.C. warned that drinking could lead to falls and broken bones. Ancient texts refer to fatal accidents, including fires, falls and drowning, caused by drunkenness.

From antiquity to the present, alcohol abuse has remained a major problem and it's amazing how things haven't changed much in the last couple thousand years. The main difference in alcohol-related accidents now is the physics. At the high speeds offered in modern vehicles, a collision or sudden impact exacts a terrible toll upon the human body.

Everyone knows drinking and driving is illegal and dangerous for the person behind the wheel, but what about the danger an impaired driver poses to passengers and others? In a number of off-duty accidents, Soldiers have lost their lives as passengers in cars driven by drunk drivers.

One of the most widely known safety campaigns—"Don't drink and drive"—has been reinforced throughout every level of the Army. Soldiers, Families and Civilians are urged not to drive after drinking and have been warned of the potential consequences of driving under the influence of alcohol.

Okay, drunk driving—bad. Got it. But a message of equal importance is that performing just about any activity while impaired is also dangerous and can result in injury or death. Soldiers have wandered into the road or attempted to cross traffic while drunk and been hit by cars. Some were hit and killed by trains while walking on the tracks. Sounds pretty impossible to most of us as trains are big and loud, but it has happened 11 times since 2000 and in one case, two people were hit by the same train. Of all 11 pedestrian/train collisions, only two were confirmed not to have involved alcohol.

According to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, in both 1997 and 2007, roughly half of all fatal pedestrian/traffic accidents involved alcohol. Of those aged 21 to 34, more than half (56 percent) involved a blood alcohol content of 0.10 or higher. The Army has lost 56 soldiers in off-duty pedestrian/traffic accidents since 2000 (excluding the train incidents). In these cases our statistics mirror those of the civilian sector, with 57 percent of Soldier pedestrian fatalities involving probable use of alcohol. All but three of these accidents occurred in the late evening, after 10 p.m., or in the early morning, before 6 a.m.

You might wonder how so many people manage to get hit by cars. The answer lies in the effects of alcohol—diminished coordination and balance, and impaired attention and judgment. These impairments contribute to many types of accidental injuries, including motor vehicle and pedestrian accidents, drowning and burns. Of those Soldiers who had not been drinking, most (70 percent) were killed when they had car trouble or stopped to help someone on the road.

Alcohol is the most frequently abused drug throughout the world and related injuries are a major cause of morbidity and mortality. Alcohol intoxication, common in both social drinkers and alcoholics, profoundly impairs cognitive function and motor skills. Ironically, many people feel a sense of mastery while they are drunk, leading them to believe that they can do anything as well as, if not better than, anyone else. This is evidenced in a number of accidents where Soldiers decided to try balcony climbing or hanging out of barracks windows while under the influence of alcohol. Many of these accidents did not have happy endings.

Since fiscal 2000, 41 Soldiers have died from off-duty falls, including five who fell from moving vehicles. Only nine of these Soldiers were confirmed not to be under the influence and nearly all fell during the day while hiking or rock climbing. Data from the National Center for Injury Prevention and Control show that excessive alcohol consumption is a significant factor in accidental deaths from falls in the civilian sector as well.

The NCIPC also reports that alcohol is involved in 40 to 50 percent of drowning deaths among young males. In addition, alcohol use is involved in about 50 percent of all deaths associated with water recreation, such as boating. Over the last decade, 87 Soldiers have drowned in swimming, boating, fishing and personal watercraft accidents. Of these fatalities, 92 percent were males, and 71 percent were 30 years old or younger. In those cases where alcohol use was examined, over 40 percent involved the use of alcohol.

Alcohol can impair our ability to do many things. That is why all 50 states, the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico impose a BAC limit of below 0.08 for driving. In addition, most states impose a BAC limit of either 0.08 or 0.10 or lower for boating, and all states have boating-under-the-influence laws.

Ancient Egyptians warned us that alcohol could make people act stupid. They described an excessive beer drinker's behavior as: "You think it proper to run down a wall and to break through the board gate; the people run away from you ... if you then talk, so from your mouth comes nonsense."

We've all seen someone behave that way when they drink too much. Intervene if you see a battle buddy about to misstep and possibly cause themselves or others harm. It usually doesn't take much effort to influence them to do the right thing. If you drink, take a cab. If you drink, don't go swimming. If you swim, wear a life jacket.

If you have a particularly argumentative friend who insists on acting stupid, call the police. It's better to have a ticked-off friend with a public intoxication ticket than to wake up the next morning, hung over, to find out your friend is now a statistic in a database. Watching out for your buddies, even when you aren't on duty, is still part of the job description of "friend."

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