

New Year's: The deadliest day of the year

December 8 2010

It's the holiday season and New Year's parties will soon be inundated with warnings about the risks of drinking and driving.

Little is ever heard, though, about the risks of drinking and walking, which can be just as dangerous, said trauma surgeon Dr. Thomas Esposito at Loyola University Health System in Maywood, Ill.

"Alcohol impairs your physical ability to walk and to drive," Esposito said. "It impairs your judgment, reflexes and coordination. It's nothing more than a socially acceptable, over-the-counter stimulant/depressant."

A [trauma surgeon](#) for more than 20 years, Esposito has witnessed the tragic aftermath of drunken walking in his own work and family. Several years ago, Esposito's cousin opted to walk instead of driving home from a party where he had been drinking.

"A driver, who I don't believe was intoxicated, did not see him and hit him, and he was killed," said Esposito, who is chief of the division of trauma, surgical critical care and burns in the Department of Surgery, Loyola University Chicago Stritch School of Medicine. "They found him on the side of the road on New Year's Day."

In 2005, the journal *Injury Prevention* reported that New Year's Day is more deadly for pedestrians than any other day of the year. From 1986 to 2002, 410 pedestrians were killed on New Year's Day. Fifty-eight percent of those killed had high blood-alcohol concentrations.

Alcohol also plays a significant role in the deaths of pedestrians throughout the year, according to the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety. In 2008, 38 percent of fatally injured pedestrians 16 and older had blood-alcohol concentrations at or above 0.08 percent, which is the legal definition for impaired driving in Illinois. The percentage rose to 53 percent for deaths occurring during 9 p.m.-6 a.m. Fourteen percent of pedestrian deaths involved drivers with BACs at or above 0.08 percent.

From July 2009 to June 2010, 105 people were treated at Loyola after being struck by cars. Fifty-five had their blood-alcohol levels checked. Of those, 16, or 29 percent, were found to have had some level of alcohol in their system. Thirteen, or 24 percent, had blood-alcohol concentrations at or above 0.08 percent.

"If they had been driving and were stopped by police, they would have been arrested for driving under the influence," Esposito said.

He added that those statistics don't take into account the people who suffer injuries in their homes from unintentional causes and violence after drinking.

"It's not just walking outside. We often see people who have been drinking that have fallen down the stairs or tripped at home and injured themselves. Others have unwisely chosen to 'get into it' with guns, knives, bottles and fists," Esposito said.

If you drink and plan to walk on New Year's Eve, or any other day of the year, you have to take special care, Esposito said. Don't wear dark clothing at night that can make it difficult for drivers to see you. Walk solely on the sidewalks and cross at designated crosswalks. Also, it's a good idea to walk in a group, which is easier for drivers to spot, and try to walk with at least one person who has not been drinking, a designated chaperone or escort.

Drivers need to take extra care when in restaurant or bar districts, since intoxicated pedestrians have slower reflexes and can be unpredictable, Esposito said. People hosting parties in which alcohol is consumed have as much of obligation to watch over their guests who are walking home as they do with those who may be driving.

"You have to be able to assess someone's perceived ability to safely get from one place to the other," Esposito said. "If their mode of transportation is a car, you do things to prevent them from driving, such as calling them a cab or finding them an unimpaired chauffeur. If that mode of transportation is their legs, then you either drive them – assuming you're not impaired – or make them stay at home with you."

Even if a guest stays at your home, you should be aware that they could trip and fall down the stairs, Esposito said.

"So you don't want to send them up to the second-story bedroom," Esposito said.

Unfortunately, Esposito's cousin took none of those precautions, the surgeon said. He was wearing dark clothing, was alone and walking in the street when he was hit.

"His death has had a devastating effect on the family, especially on his parents," Esposito said. "They required a lot of professional, psychological support and they really have never been the same, especially around the holidays."

Provided by Loyola University Health System

Citation: New Year's: The deadliest day of the year (2010, December 8) retrieved 25 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2010-12-year-deadliest-day.html>

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