

# The perils of drunken walking

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(Medical Xpress) -- Drinking and driving is a much-publicized, dangerous combination, but is walking after drinking any safer?

"No, alcohol impairs your [physical ability](#), period," said trauma surgeon Dr. Thomas Esposito at Loyola University Health System in Maywood, Ill.

"Every movement ranging from driving a car to simply walking to the bathroom is compromised," Esposito said. "Alcohol impairs your judgment, reflexes and [coordination](#). Alcohol is nothing more than a socially acceptable, over-the-counter [stimulant/depressant](#) and, especially during the [holidays](#), alcohol is frequently abused."

A [trauma surgeon](#) for more than 25 years, Esposito has witnessed the tragic aftermath of drunken walking in his own work many times. "From July 2009 to June 2010, 105 people were treated at Loyola after being struck by cars. Fifty-five had their blood-alcohol content checked. Of those, 16 individuals, or 29 percent, were found to have had some level of alcohol in their system," 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. "Thirteen individuals, or 24 percent, had blood-alcohol concentrations at or above .08 percent, the accepted level for intoxication."

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 (BAC).

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 between 9 p.m. and 6 a.m. Fourteen percent of pedestrian deaths involved drivers with blood-alcohol content at or above .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.

Loyola University Health System's hospital is the only Level 1 Trauma Center in Illinois – and one of a select group nationwide – to be verified by the American College of Surgeons. A complete array of medical, surgical and ancillary services is available through an interdisciplinary program that serves the total needs of injured adult or pediatric patients from prevention through rehabilitation, 24 hours a day. These services include hospital transport, emergency medicine, general surgery and its subspecialties — such as orthopaedics, neurosurgery and others — critical care, nursing and a multitude of others including social work, rehabilitation and nutrition.

The Burn & Shock Trauma Institute serves as the research arm of

Loyola's Burn and Trauma Centers investigating problems in post-injury immunosuppression, wound healing and nutritional support. The multidisciplinary institute also supports an injury prevention program, which conducts community outreach activities.

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. Some tips:

Like Rudolph, be a beacon of light. "If planning on walking at night, don't wear dark clothing that can make it difficult for drivers to see you."

Stay out of the road. "Walk solely on the sidewalks and cross at designated crosswalks."

Enforce the buddy system. "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."

Give pedestrians a brake. "Drivers need to take extra care when in restaurant or bar districts, since intoxicated pedestrians have slower reflexes and can be unpredictable."

Be a good host. "People hosting parties in which alcohol is consumed have as much of an obligation to watch over their guests who are walking home as they do with those who may be driving."

## **Grab a Pillow, Not a Cab**

"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 or down to the basement sofa."

Provided by Loyola University Health System

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