

Tipsy? Expert's tips for reining in holiday drinking

December 7 2012, by Molly Mcelroy

It can hardly be the holiday season without a nip in the air and a nip of 'nog. A family gathering goes down a little easier with a glass, or three, of wine. And we might go to a festive work party thinking "I'll just have a ginger ale," only to end up reasoning "On the other hand, one cocktail can't hurt."

Oh, the slippery slope. And it's not just when snow is falling.

The omnipresence of [alcohol](#) at holiday gatherings and the social ease that a little buzz provides make it hard to limit ourselves. Risk of relapse among alcoholics is greater this time of year, when stress and [negative emotions](#) may mix at gatherings where alcohol has a central role.

Dennis Donovan, director of the Alcohol and Drug Abuse Institute at the University of Washington, says that alcohol is a major issue around the holidays for both [social drinkers](#) and those recovering from alcoholism. He's spent more than three decades treating people with alcohol and other addictions. He has advice for how to drink moderately, and treatment approaches he's used with people recovering from alcohol problems.

So perhaps we can strive to be home, but not hammered, for the holidays.

For social drinkers and people hoping to curb their [alcohol consumption](#), Donovan suggests following these guidelines:

- **Count your drinks.** In many cases, people lose track of how much they've had. This is especially true when they're sharing a pitcher of beer and someone refills their glass – it's easy for drinkers to not notice or say "yes" to more than they want to drink.
- **Know a standard serving size.** Large wine glasses, higher [alcohol content](#) in some beers and generous liquor pours in mixed drinks make the "I only had one!" claim questionable. There are guides online showing standard serving sizes for alcohol.
- **One drink, one hour.** Most people's bodies can process about one drink per hour. "It's like a funnel, you might take in lots of alcohol but the body cannot process it any faster," Donovan said. Pace yourself to one drink an hour or so, and every hour or two you might take a drink "off" and have water or another non-alcoholic beverage instead. Also, make sure to have eaten something.
- **Ginger ale looks like a cocktail.** Teetotalers not wanting to attract attention or questions can stick to ginger ale or other non-alcoholic drinks that look like cocktails.
- **Get support.** [Moderation Management](#) is a support group that helps social drinkers who are not alcohol dependent achieve and maintain a goal of staying within safe drinking limits.

For people struggling with alcohol use or in recovery, Donovan advises:

- **Say no.** Firmly, confidently turn down drinks and become resistant to social pressure and arm-twisting. It's a learned skill that takes practice. "It's like a play. You need to rehearse your lines and convince the audience," Donovan said. Some lines to try: "No, I've reached my limit" or "I'm not drinking tonight".

Donovan added that the drink refusal approach requires a commitment to yourself to abstain or have a drink limit. "If you're not committed, it won't help," he said.

- **Ride out cravings.** Using a treatment strategy known as mindfulness, let yourself be aware of a desire, impulse or craving, then wait it out. Distract yourself – take a walk, strike up a conversation, move away from the liquor cabinet. Think of it as "urge surfing," Donovan said, where you imagine your craving as a wave. The wave increases in intensity, heightens and then crests. As a surfer, you ride it out. Once the wave is gone, the power behind it dissipates.
- **Look out for stinking thinking.** In 12-step programs, stinking thinking is when you notice you're beginning to think in a way that leads to drinking. It usually starts with a seemingly small decision, like running an errand that brings you close to a favorite bar or stopping by a holiday party. "It seemed to come out of nowhere" is how many people in treatment describe their relapses to Donovan. Think through the consequences of small decisions – "If I go to the party, what will I say if someone offers me a drink?"
- **Support groups.** Like Pavlov's dogs salivating to the sound of a bell, people with [alcohol problems](#) are conditioned to crave alcohol in response to social and emotional cues. These cues, such as family conflicts, become more prominent around the holidays, Donovan said. Support and camaraderie of other people trying to stay sober and clean can help you get through this high-stress time. He suggests 12-step or mutual support programs like [Alcoholics Anonymous](#), [Women for Sobriety](#) or [Secular Organization for Sobriety](#), and notes that people don't have to be sober to join – they just have to have a desire to stop drinking.

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