

SURVEY: 1/3 of yearly alcohol intake takes place over holidays

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🕒 December 18, 2021 📁 Community Features 💬



Dr. C. Tom Brophy, the medical director at the Gaiser Addiction Center, said he's not surprised that people struggle with alcohol more around the holidays.

ERIC FREEHLING/ BUTLER EAGLE

The bright lights of the holiday season can conceal a dark truth.

According to a survey by Detox.net, an online resource for finding drug and alcohol detox centers, the average Pennsylvanian consumes nearly 30% of his overall alcohol intake for the entire year during the end-of-year holiday season, beginning on Thanksgiving.

The national average is 29%. To put it another way, one-third of Pennsylvanians' annual alcohol consumption for the year takes place in just a six-week period.

The survey also reveals:

22% of drinkers say they mentally prepare themselves prior to the drinking season.

A quarter of drinkers said they will drink more this year as compared to previous years due to the lifting of lockdown restrictions.



Jenny Wylie Carlin

End-of-year season

Thanksgiving represents the start of the end-of-year season for many people – when office parties collide with Christmas get-togethers and other holiday events such as New Year's Eve. The one thing they all have in common is alcohol – think spiked eggnog, hot buttered rum, hot toddies or champagne toasts at midnight.

Although drinking isn't limited to the single end-of-year season, alcohol does hold a particular significance during this period of celebration and indulgence.

Told of the survey's results, Jenny Wylie Carlin, clinical manager for Ramsay Hall, a long-term residential program in Aliquippa for Gateway Rehabilitation Center which has an outpatient clinic in Wexford, wasn't surprised.

“I would say that isn't out of the realm of possibility. There are a lot of parties as we come into this festive time on year,” said Wylie Carlin.

Between relatives coming to town, office parties and get-togethers with friends, coupled with the loosening of COVID restrictions, “people are looking to socialize much more,” she said.

Dr. C. Tom Brophy, the medical director at the Gaiser Addiction Center, 165 Old Plank Road, said he's not surprised that people struggle with alcohol more around the holidays.

“It's supposed to be about happiness, joy and family,” Brophy said. “But when you are struggling with substance abuse, holidays are just an additional strain and stressor.”

Add to that the dark and cold days of a winter in the Northeast, said Brophy, and the death rates for alcohol and opiate abusers go up.

Plus during the COVID pandemic, Brophy said alcohol sales have risen. The enforced isolation of social distancing and quarantining, as well as the availability of having liquor delivered to the home, set the stage for greater consumption.



Bill Halle, founder of Grace Youth and Family Foundation, said it's even harder for younger adults who are below the legal age to drink to resist the temptation to overindulge.

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Harder for younger adults

If the urge to overindulge is hard for adults to resist at this time of year, it's even harder for younger adults who are below the legal age to drink, according to Bill Halle, founder and CEO of Grace Youth and Family Foundation.

His foundation has a program, Underage Alcohol and Other Drugs Education, that is offered to anyone who has an alcohol offense with the law as a minor or under 21.

The course is a minimum of 12 hours long over four weeks and involves essays, tests to show what they've learned, and, if necessary, tests of a different kind to show they've

abstained from using alcohol, Halle said.

The largest percentage of those taking the class are between 16 and 19, he said.

“This is their first time getting caught, not necessarily the first time they drank,” said Halle.

Teens, Halle said, drink differently from adults.

“The concern is binge drinking. This isn't someone having a glass of wine with dinner or a beer after a hard day of work,” said Halle.

Teen drinking is event-driven — a homecoming or a house party — and teens are drinking with the idea of getting drunk.

“And when they are college-age they are 'pregaming,' drinking before getting to the event, and then drinking some more,” said Halle.

“The trend that is most concerning is we're seeing blood alcohol content levels significantly higher than in years past,” he said. Halle blames new products specifically aimed at younger drinkers for this development.

“When we were kids, we were drinking beer or hard liquor,” Halle said. “Now there are White Claws and Trulys and Four Locos where you have a flavored drink with a stimulant mixed in with a higher level of alcohol.”

These fruity, carbonated beverages are marketed to younger drinkers because the younger drinkers don't like the taste of beer or hard liquor.

Still while beer and hard liquor is 3 to 4% alcohol by volume, Halle said, the new drinks are 5 to 8 % alcohol by volume.

It's not just seltzers that are being marketed to younger drinkers. Hard liquor is being introduced in more palatable to younger drinkers.

“It's simply marketing and availability targeted toward minors intentionally,” said Halle.

“Older drinkers don't go to the bar and order 'pink Twisted Tea.'”

Extra enticing

The holiday season is extra enticing for younger drinkers. They have time off from school, sports seasons have ended, they're having downtime with their families.

Parents need to do their due diligence at this time of year, Halle said. Find out where and when their teens' party will be.



The Booziest Time OF THE YEAR

The % of yearly alcohol intake which happens during the holiday season between Thanksgiving and NYE.

| STATE | % |
|----------------|----|
| Alabama | 33 |
| Alaska | 28 |
| Arizona | 27 |
| Arkansas | 25 |
| California | 31 |
| Colorado | 25 |
| Connecticut | 23 |
| Delaware | 32 |
| Florida | 34 |
| Georgia | 33 |
| Hawaii | 25 |
| Idaho | 28 |
| Illinois | 30 |
| Indiana | 33 |
| Iowa | 19 |
| Kansas | 33 |
| Kentucky | 36 |
| Louisiana | 22 |
| Maine | 26 |
| Maryland | 27 |
| Massachusetts | 31 |
| Michigan | 29 |
| Minnesota | 26 |
| Mississippi | 31 |
| Missouri | 37 |
| Montana | 30 |
| Nebraska | 23 |
| Nevada | 24 |
| New Hampshire | 23 |
| New Jersey | 29 |
| New Mexico | 20 |
| New York | 34 |
| North Carolina | 27 |
| North Dakota | 20 |
| Ohio | 27 |
| Oklahoma | 25 |
| Oregon | 26 |
| Pennsylvania | 29 |
| Rhode Island | 25 |
| South Carolina | 25 |
| South Dakota | 28 |
| Tennessee | 23 |

“If you don't follow up with a parent there's going to be a difficulty,” he said.

Alcoholics or people hoping to avoid overindulgence in poured Christmas spirits need to be diligent, too, noted Wylie Carlin.

“If you are trying to stay sober, you need to reach out to any of your fellowships – AA, NA,” she said.

“Have an exit strategy for parties, take a sober friend, set a time limit,” she said.

“AA has service work. Focus on that and other activities, not alcohol. Go to meetings, monitor yourself,” said Wylie Carlin.

Brophy agreed.

“The first step is to open up and communicate. This might not be the time for rehabilitation, but practice harm reduction,” he said.

By that, Brophy meant just decreasing the amount of alcohol consumed, surrendering the car keys if someone is not willing to enter into full-on treatment.

Parents of teens may think they are practicing their own form providing alcohol themselves when there is underage drinking going on in their home, said Halle.

Their rationale it's safer to have them drinking at home so that if someone drinks too much, they can sleep it off and not be on the roads.

But Halle said, a person's blood alcohol content continues to rise even when a drunk person is asleep.

“People party too much, someone takes them away to sleep it off. But the blood alcohol content continues to rise and can affect the heart rate and the breathing rate,”

| | |
|---------------|----|
| Texas | 29 |
| Utah | 30 |
| Vermont | 18 |
| Virginia | 27 |
| Washington | 23 |
| West Virginia | 24 |
| Wisconsin | 24 |
| Wyoming | 23 |

Survey of 3,946 respondents; November 2021



said Halle. "A lot of alcohol-related deaths aren't fiery car crashes or choking on vomit like John Bonham. It's just not waking up."

Withdrawal could be deadly

That's the hidden danger of alcohol abuse, said Brophy. Because alcohol is legal and socially acceptable people don't realize that alcohol withdrawal can actually kill you.

Detoxing from alcohol is more dangerous than quitting opiates, he said.

"If you are drinking four to five drinks a day, every single day," said Brophy and then stop, the drinker can have seizures and undergo the "DTs," or delirium tremens.

The DTs are characterized by confusion, shaking, shivering, hallucinations and even death. Minor alcohol withdrawal is characterized by tremors, anxiety, nausea, vomiting and insomnia.

For this reason, Wylie Carson said heavy drinkers shouldn't try to "detox by yourself," such as the recently popular practice of "Dry January," where people abstain from liquor for the entire month.

Detox.net's survey of 3,000 drinkers, revealed that nearly 1 in 5 admit they become concerned about their health ahead of this heavy drinking period, which is an indication that many are aware of the various risks and dangers associated with excessive alcohol consumption in such a short period of time.



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Eric was born in Butler and grew up in Winfield Township. He graduated from Knoch High School and later Indiana University of Pa. with a degree in Journalism. After working as a reporter and editor with the Kittanning Leader-Times, he moved to Bloomington, Illinois, where he worked at The Pantagraph newspaper as a copy editor, page designer, reporter and business editor. Freehling later worked at the Houston Chronicle as senior copy editor and the Chicago Tribune as a copy editor on the

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