



# News Release

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## **Navigating Holiday Cheer**

*Expert Tips for Mindful Alcohol Consumption During the Festive Season*

It's the season when time blurs a bit, celebrations abound and cozy is the name of the game. However, beginning November through the first of the year, it can be a challenging time for people who struggle with addiction. Seasonal alcoholic beverages at festive parties are woven into many holiday traditions, and many experts agree that consumption can bring risks worth keeping in mind as the holiday season gets into full swing.

"For centuries, alcohol has been a staple of holiday celebrations, acting as a social lubricant and a symbol of hospitality, joy and togetherness," said Amy Stark, M.D., an addiction psychiatrist at Texas Tech Physicians. "Whether it's a champagne toast at midnight on New Year's Eve or enjoying a glass of mulled wine by the fire, alcohol often plays a central role in how we connect with others during the holidays. In many cultures, sharing a drink is more than just a gesture; it's a sign of goodwill and inclusion, a way to bring people together and celebrate the season's warmth and cheer. These traditions contribute to the perception of alcohol as an essential element of holiday celebrations."

During the holiday season, the likelihood of alcohol-related accidents, including drunk driving, significantly increases. According to the U.S. National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, an alarming number of traffic fatalities involve alcohol-impaired drivers during the Christmas and New Year's holiday periods.

"For one, there are simply more opportunities to drink, with a calendar full of social gatherings where alcohol is often freely flowing," said Lori Thompson, a fourth-year medical student studying psychiatry at Texas Tech University Health Sciences Center School of Medicine. "Additionally, the holidays can be an emotionally charged time. While many people experience joy and excitement, others may feel stress, loneliness, grief or financial pressure. It's not uncommon for some people to turn to alcohol as a way to cope with these feelings, which can lead to negative patterns of use and overindulgence."

Excessive drinking or binge drinking, which is defined as consuming a large amount of alcohol in a short period or heavy drinking over time, poses significant health risks. Stark

said these risks include alcohol poisoning, accidents and injuries, as well as long-term health issues like liver disease, cardiovascular problems and mental health disorders.

“The holiday season can exacerbate existing mental health issues for some individuals, particularly those dealing with depression, anxiety or substance use disorders,” Stark said. “The societal pressure to be happy and festive can sometimes lead to increased drinking as a way to numb negative emotions or cope with stress. Unfortunately, this can create a vicious cycle where alcohol exacerbates mental health problems, leading to further drinking.”

High-risk drinking in women of any age and men over 65 years old is defined as drinking more than three drinks on any single occasion or more than seven drinks in one week. In men under 65 years old, high-risk drinking is defined as more than four drinks on any single occasion or more than 14 drinks in one week. Stark warned that people who drink more than the daily or weekly limits are at a higher risk of negative outcomes.

Stark and Thompson recommended adhering to these tips when navigating alcohol consumption during the holiday season:

- **Set limits.** Decide ahead of time how many drinks you’ll have and stick to it. Being mindful of your alcohol intake can help prevent overindulgence.
- **Alternate with non-alcoholic beverages.** Try alternating alcoholic drinks with water or other non-alcoholic options. This can help keep your alcohol consumption in check and reduce the risk of dehydration and over-intoxication.
- **Plan ahead.** If you plan to drink, make sure you have a safe way to get home. Arrange for a designated driver, use public transportation or consider ride-sharing services.
- **Be mindful of emotional triggers.** The holidays can be tough for many reasons. If you’re feeling stressed, lonely or overwhelmed, try reaching out to friends, family or a mental health professional rather than turning to alcohol as a coping mechanism.
- **Host responsibly.** If you’re hosting a holiday party, consider offering a variety of non-alcoholic drinks and encouraging moderate drinking. Providing food and creating a safe environment can also help reduce the risks associated with alcohol consumption.
- **Don’t be afraid to say no.** You never have to partake if you don’t want to. It’s okay to say no when offered a drink; no further explanation as to why you aren’t drinking is needed.

“Ask yourself these questions,” Stark suggested. “How do you feel physically and mentally when you drink? How about after you’ve been drinking? Do you ever feel like you can’t stop once you’ve started? Do you ever feel that alcohol keeps you from being able to do the things that are important to you? Does your alcohol use hurt your important relationships? Talk to your doctor if you want to cut back; many resources are available. If you have been drinking heavily for a long time, it is important that you not stop abruptly, but talk to your doctor first about how to safely decrease your use.”