

What is Binge Drinking? This is the first of a four part series.

Gene Gates
Health Promotions Coordinator
Wellness Center
Naval Hospital Lemoore

A drinking binge is commonly defined as having five or more "standard" drinks in a row for men, and four or more in a row for women. The definition of binge drinking can be confusing, because many other factors come into play, some of which are discussed below. The bottom line is that any time someone sets out to get drunk, and then drinks a large amount of alcohol in a short time, it is a binge and it is deadly dangerous. The "five-four" rule is a sensible cutoff to warn people that they are about to enter the danger zone.

Some of the factors that confuse the definition of binge drinking are the amount of time that passes while someone is drinking, the food eaten, the situation, and medications the person may be taking.

First off, the binge drinking definition says that in a binge, the drinks are consumed "in a row." This implies that they are consumed more or less as quickly as possible. If a person is drinking that quickly, he or she will become drunk, and it does constitute a binge. Some people say, "Well, I had five drinks, but "x" hours went by, so I don't think it was a binge." If many hours passed while the person was drinking, perhaps consuming five drinks did not equal a "binge" on that occasion. But in once sense, it hardly matters.

Call it a "binge" or call it something else; over one hour or over ten, five drinks on one occasion is not a healthy amount of alcohol for anyone to consume. Five drinks on one occasion will make almost anyone "legally" drunk, and will make most people quite drunk. At least five non-drinking hours after the last drink would have had to pass before the person would be sober.

If someone has a big meal before drinking, it takes longer for the alcohol to reach the bloodstream. However, when you are talking about four or five drinks, no meal is going to keep the person from becoming drunk. Again, bingeing boils down to intent + number of drinks in a row. If someone intends to become drunk, and drinks four or five drinks (depending on gender,) it's high-risk drinking no matter what you call it.

Factors like unusual situations and medications lower the number of drinks that constitute a binge. If a person is in an unusual or uncomfortable situation, his or her discomfort will escalate the effects of alcohol somewhat. Even more seriously, if a person is taking any one of a large number of medications – both over-the-counter and prescription medications – he or she may become drunk with very little alcohol. In addition, drinking alcohol while taking medications can be extremely dangerous. Acetaminophen (Tylenol,) barbiturates, benzodiazepines, and prescription pain medication are among the most dangerous, but many others can cause trouble, as well.

Once and for all, then, a drinking binge is having five or more "standard" drinks in a row for men, and four or more in a row for women, especially if the person's goal is to get drunk fast. Remember, binge drinking is deadly dangerous.