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College students binge drink most

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News Reporter

College freshmen have an increased risk of binge drinking and other alcohol-related dangers, according to an analysis conducted by the New Mexico branch of the American Automobile Association.

Casey Akins, coordinator for Choosing Healthy Options in Community Environments at New Mexico State University, said freshmen are more at risk, because they are younger and less experienced than other students. He said they feel free and, for many, college is the first time they have been around people who may purchase alcohol for them.

Akins said binge drinking for a male is usually defined as having five or more drinks, while binge drinking for a female is four or more drinks. However, both numbers vary depending on weight. The legal blood alcohol concentration in New Mexico is .08.

"We see that 42 percent of freshmen report binge drinking, increasing to 43 percent for sophomores," Steven Bloch, senior research associate for AAA, said in a news release. "Binge drinking peaks in the junior year at 46 percent, dropping to 45 percent in the senior year."

Akins said the reason for the progressively higher numbers in later college years is because students get older the legal availability of alcohol changes.

While in high school, college-bound students do not engage in binge drinking as frequently as non-college bound students, according to studies completed by AAA over the past several years.

However non-college students binge drink at a rate of 34 percent, Bloch said, less often than college freshmen.

Akins said binge drinking is dangerous, because it impairs judgement to a point where people stop watching their drinks and are more likely to engage in unplanned and unprotected sex.

Men tend to get more violent when they drink, while women's vulnerability increases, Akins said. Between 90-95 percent of sexual assault involves alcohol, she said.

Akins said CHOICES is not an abstinence program, but it tries to provide students with information about drinking.

"Just knowing that most college students don't binge drink helps a lot," she said. "People just think it's a social norm."

CHOICES assists students by helping them recognize they have a choice and drinking heavily is a health risk, and by helping them understand the media influence and consequences of binge drinking, Akins said.

"A lot of times, the biggest choices that you make are the ones you don't even realize you're making," Akins said.

Peer educators involved with CHOICES give presentations about alcohol-related issues to any class on campus that requests it. CHOICES has other outreach programs, including the distribution of Juarez kits,

which are packets of information telling students how to be safe in Mexico, and informative posters and bulletin boards around campus.

"Our goal is to have people have multiple exposures to the information," Akins said.

Deborah Clein, hall manager at Garcia Hall, a primarily freshmen residence hall at NMSU, said at least once a semester housing works with the Student Health Center and CHOICES to educate students about the dangers of drinking.

"We have programming every Thursday at 8 p.m. to give students an alternative to going to Mexico," Clein said.

The residence hall also provides entertainment on the weekends to discourage drinking on campus because Garcia Hall is a substance-free facility.

"Forty-three percent seems high, but if you look at people's perception of college, that everybody's drinking, it's not that bad," said Ryan L. Van Dusen, area coordinator for Housing and Residential Life.

"Drinking is the same across the board - we see all types," Van Dusen said. "It's about even; no particular group stands out more than another. But we have to keep aware - I don't think the trends have changed."

Akins said students who choose to drink should alternate between alcoholic and non-alcoholic drinks and have a friend look out for them. Students should set a safe drinking limit of two drinks and should drink water and eat before and while drinking.

It is also important to understand the risk of drinking games, Akins said.

"You hit a danger zone before you realize it, because you're taking in a lot of alcohol in a short amount of time," she said.

Symptoms of alcohol poisoning include vomiting, passing out, slow, shallow breathing, cold, clammy skin and difficulty awakening, according to a CHOICES pamphlet.

Akins said people with alcohol poisoning should not be left alone because they can choke on their vomit, and if necessary, emergency help should be called.

For more information about the CHOICES program, call 646-2813 or visit www.nmsu.edu/~choices.

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