

Another round - maybe not

During the festive season people tend to go out more and drinks are usually flowing abundantly but when do you say: I have had enough?

Driving under the influence of alcohol remains one of the biggest threats to road safety in South Africa. According to the South Africans Against Drunk Driving (SADD), 18 000 South Africans die in motor car accidents every year. 150 000 others are seriously injured - alcohol is involved in about 50 percent of these cases.

Dr Izak Loftus, forensic and anatomical pathologist from the Pathcare-group and member of the National Pathology Group, describes the effect of alcohol as "a tidal wave washing over the brain".

As it washes over, it suppresses the normal functions of the brain. Dr Loftus notes that there are six stages of intoxication.

At each stage alcohol suppresses a different part of the brain, resulting in an inability to function normally:

☐ Stage one: legal and jolly

The first stage of intoxication generally occurs after about two drinks, when you are still within the legal limit. The alcohol at this stage has reached the frontal lobes of your brain, causing you to feel more relaxed, jovial, slightly more confident and happier. Although you are still within the legal limit at this stage, your judgment could become slightly impaired and you still stand the risk of doing something silly and out of character.

☐ Stage two: drunken driver

At the second stage, you have had a couple more drinks and you are no longer within the legal limit.

The alcohol has now progressed and reached the parietal lobes of the brain. Your brain's ability to function properly is put to the test now and you could be classified as being drunk. Your senses become impaired which includes your eyesight, thus resulting in impairment in your driving ability. You begin to fumble and your speech becomes slurred. You should stop drinking at this stage.

☐ Stage 3: reckless endangerment

If you continue to drink, you will reach stage three. The alcohol has now made its way to the occipital lobe of the brain. You are now way over the legal limit and your peripheral vision has seriously

decreased. You should not be driving as your ability to judge how fast or slow other cars are approaching is hampered. Your sensory ability is also impaired, making simple tasks such as tying your shoelaces extremely difficult. If you can still stand at this point, you should really stop now.

☐ Stage 4: drunk man walking

If you decided to continue drinking, depending on your size, the alcohol will reach the cerebellum. You more than likely will not be able to stand up straight and you will feel extremely tired and light-headed. The average person will not be able to drink after this point.

☐ Stage 5: out for the count

Ongoing consumption of alcoholic beverages will result in the alcohol washing over the diencephalons and the mesencephalon, which is the mid-brain.

At this point you will pass out or be hunched down, vomiting and shaking.

You are in danger of having severe alcohol poisoning; you may need your stomach pumped and you could become comatose.

☐ Stage 6: deadly encounter

Your alcohol levels have soared and you are in danger of the alcohol washing over the brain stem (medulla oblongata).

If this is the case, you are in serious trouble. The brain stem is where your breathing and blood circulation is controlled.

When alcohol suppresses the brain stem, your breathing and blood flow could be affected, resulting in serious complications - at worst death.

Alcohol is a deadly stimulant which should be consumed in moderation.

Depending on your weight and size, the effects of alcohol will vary.

Thus a bigger person may be able to consume more alcohol than someone smaller, although there is no guarantee that he or she will not experience the same side effects.

Think before getting into a car if you have had too much to drink.

Killing an innocent person while you are under the influence of alcohol may leave you wishing you had stopped at the legal limit.

For more information, log onto www.sadd.org.za