

WASTED

Life's no party for teens who drink too much, too fast.

By Julie Mehta

The last thing Sebastien remembers about the fall weekend in 2003 when he and his friends visited a state college for a football game was drinking a half-gallon of whiskey. "When I woke up, I thought I was dead because all I saw was a bright white light," the 18-year-old from Nashville, Tenn., recalled. "Then I realized I was in the hospital. The paramedics had found me lying facedown on the side of the road. I'd flatlined [in the ambulance] on the way to the hospital, but they brought me back."

The high school senior from Tennessee had a *blood alcohol concentration (BAC)* of 0.42 percent, more than five times the state level of legal drunkenness (0.08 percent). BAC is the amount of alcohol present in the blood, and it increases exponentially with each drink a person consumes.

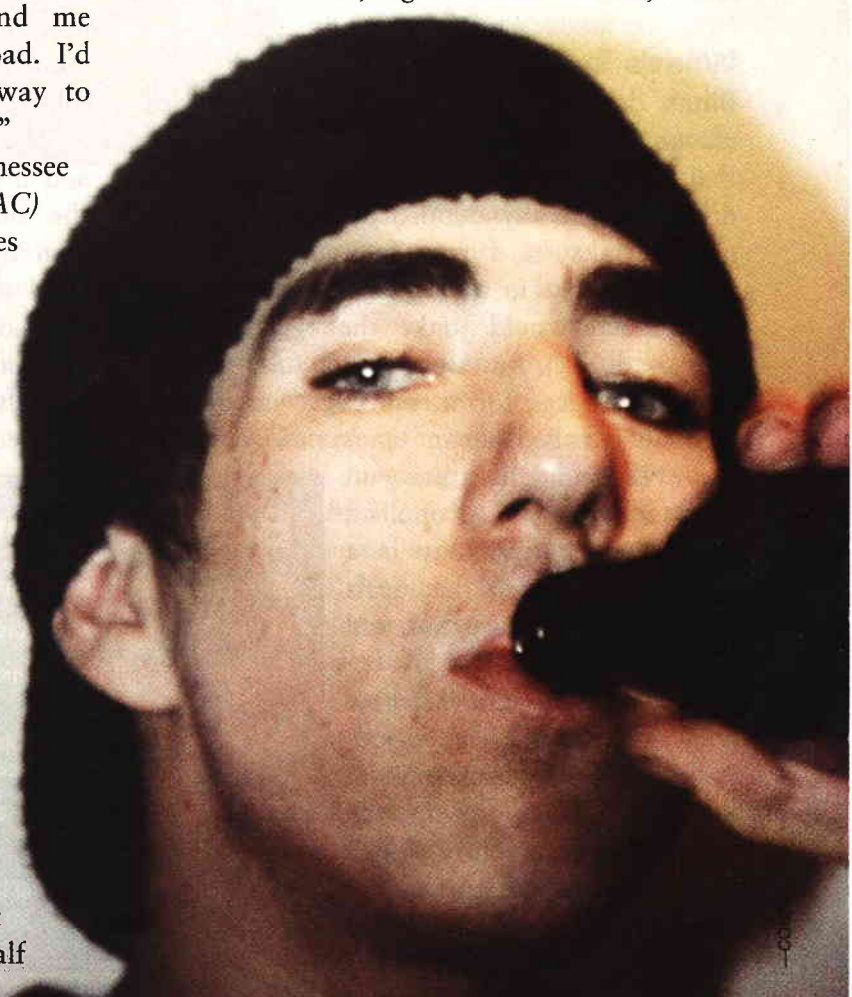
Sebastien discovered the hard way one of the frightening consequences of *binge drinking* (drinking with the intention of becoming drunk). Those consequences can also include stunted brain development and car accidents.

Problem Drinkers

The good news is that teens aren't drinking as much as people might think. According to a survey by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 80 percent of eighth graders and more than half

of 12th graders had not drunk any alcohol in the 30 days preceding the survey.

The bad news is that among those who had consumed alcohol, most drank too much, too fast. "The pattern among teen drinkers is an average of six drinks at a time, six times a month, while for adults it's three drinks at a time, eight times a month,"



'I would wake up with cuts from falling down the stairs and getting into fights I didn't remember.'

Susan Foster, director of policy research for the National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University in New York, explained to *Current Health*. "So binge drinking is more the norm among young people." According to national surveys, about 30 percent of all high school seniors and 12 percent of all eighth graders binge-drink in a given two-week period.

What's in a Binge?

Binge drinking—not to be confused with *alcoholism* (a progressive addiction to alcohol that interferes with daily life)—is a style of drinking generally defined as having five or more drinks in a row for men and four or more drinks in a row for women. "That's how much would make the typical adult [legally drunk], but teens aren't fully grown, so it takes less for them to get impaired," said Vivian Faden, an *epidemiologist* with the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA). Epidemiology is a branch of medicine that deals with the incidence, spread, and control of diseases.

Other factors influence how alcohol affects a person, including genetics, food consumption, and, most important, the person's weight and gender. "A female's ability to metabolize alcohol at the gut level is less, so if you take a male and

female student, both 120 pounds, the female will have a higher BAC with the same number of drinks," explained Ralph Lopez, an adolescent medicine specialist in New York City.

'Taking Things to Extremes'

The disparity in the effect of alcohol on boys versus girls isn't the only gender difference. Experts say that the reasons boys and girls tend to drink also vary. "With boys, drinking is usually about sensation seeking and having fun," said Foster. "With girls, it's more about coping with negative emotions and relieving anxiety or depression."

Jessica from Spokane, Wash., was in the sixth grade when she binged for the first time while staying overnight at a friend's house. She and her friend pulled a bottle of tequila from the liquor cabinet and drank it with orange juice. "At first I didn't like it, but after a while, it felt normal. It was the first time in my life I felt complete," Jessica told *CH*.

The next day, she had a horrible hangover and promised herself not to drink again. But she did—at first a few times a month, then once a week, having four drinks at a time on average. Jessica started drinking with older boys and found herself getting more and more intoxicated trying to keep up with their drinking pace.

"Teens are at a place in their development

Bingeing, by the Numbers

- Yearly cost of alcohol abuse: \$148 billion
- Number of teens who die daily from alcohol-related crashes: 8
- Percentage of teen drinkers who will become alcohol-dependent: 24.5%
- Percentage of teens who report drinking and driving during the 30 days preceding the survey: 12%
- Amount of money spent annually by college students on alcohol: \$5.5 billion
- Number of students each year who require emergency health care for alcohol overdose: 30,000

SOURCES: NATIONAL INSTITUTE ON DRUG ABUSE (NIDA); NIDA; NATIONAL INSTITUTE ON ALCOHOL ABUSE AND ALCOHOLISM, YOUTH RISK BEHAVIOR SURVEILLANCE, 2003; OFFICE FOR SUBSTANCE ABUSE PREVENTION; AMERICAN COLLEGE OF EMERGENCY PHYSICIANS



The Aftermath

Some of the short-term consequences of bingeing include

- hangover (headache, nausea, shakiness, exhaustion),
- respiratory arrest,
- choking to death on vomit,
- increased risk of sexual assault,
- loss of consciousness,
- sudden death from stroke.

For 16-year-old Ty from Spokane, Wash., alcohol became an obsession. “If someone said, ‘Let’s get drunk tonight,’ that’s all I could think about all day,” he said. He stopped spending time with his siblings and started stealing cars with his friends. Finally he was caught and sent to

where they will take things to extremes,” said Andrew Finch, director of the Association of Recovery Schools, a group of high schools scattered across the country for teens overcoming substance abuse problems. “They’re testing their limits, and they feel invincible.”

Chase from Concord, Calif., started drinking at age 11. “I would drink alcohol at parties,” he said. “I felt like I fit in, and I didn’t worry about the consequences.” Soon he found he needed more booze to get drunk and started *blacking out*, forgetting what had happened while he was drinking. “I would wake up with cuts from falling down the stairs and getting into fights I didn’t remember,” he said.

Hitting Bottom

Initially, people who drink alcohol may feel that they’re “loosening up,” said Finch. “But before you know it, you lose your handle on reality and do things you wouldn’t usually do.”

an alcohol abuse rehabilitation program.

Chase was caught with booze repeatedly before being ordered into a long-term treatment program. Now 16, he admits, “I lost a lot of trust with my mom and little brother, and I lost my self-respect.”

For some teens, the consequences of drinking, especially bingeing, can be much worse. Researchers estimate that it is a factor in one- to two-thirds of sexual-assault and date-rape cases among teens and college students. A study by the Kaiser Family Foundation showed that 23 percent of sexually active teens and young adults in the United States had unprotected sex because they were drinking or using drugs at the time. Failure to use a condom can lead to transmission of diseases such as HIV. In Jessica’s case, it led to her getting pregnant at age 14. She stopped drinking and got treatment before giving birth to a girl last May.

Dead Drunk

You have probably heard plenty about the dangers of drinking and driving, but that's not the only way booze kills. "Alcohol is the leading contributor to death among youth under 21," said Faden. Each year, 7,000 young people die because of alcohol-related accidents, including drowning and motor-vehicle crashes. Another 1,800 lose their lives through murders or suicides in which alcohol played a role.

Even if you make it home safely after drinking, a nasty hangover may not be your only worry. "Alcohol is a respiratory and central nervous system suppressant," said Lopez. At first, alcohol stimulates the brain, but with each additional drink, the brain progressively slows down. "At 0.10 percent BAC, a fair number [of people] will show inebriation. At 0.20, very few will not have some impairment of abilities. Once you're above 0.30, you're lucky you're still breathing. At 0.40, you and the Grim Reaper are walking hand in hand."

That's why Sebastien, with a 0.42 BAC that autumn night, was so lucky to survive. Each year, hundreds of people die of an

alcohol overdose, many of them college students. Some choke on their own vomit while passed out. In others, the areas of the brain that control life functions simply shut down. For months before he nearly died, Sebastien had been drinking 12 to 15 beers several times a week. Now a college freshman, he is surrounded by more temptation. However, Sebastien says, drinking is no longer an option. "I knew I'd be dead by 19 if I didn't stop."

This Is Your Brain on Alcohol

Even a few hours of binge drinking can have far-ranging effects. "The brain continues to develop into the early 20s, and exposing the brain to alcohol in that period may impair brain development," Faden said. Several studies have shown that alcohol can have lingering effects on the *hippocampus*, an area of the brain used for learning and memory. "It gets out of control," said Jessica. "Things happen you can't change."

"Looking back now, I think drinking was a waste of my time," said Chase. "Life is a lot richer being clean." **CH2**

A Drink Is a Drink

One drink contains 12 grams of pure *ethanol* (the intoxicating element in liquor). That's the amount found in 12 ounces of beer or a wine cooler, 5 ounces of wine, or 1.5 ounces of distilled spirits, such as vodka or whiskey. *Alcopops* are drinks sweetened to disguise the taste of the alcohol; they generally contain at least as much alcohol as a bottle of beer.

Remember:

Whether you're having one wine cooler or one shot of hard liquor, the amount of alcohol going into your body is the same.

