

DRUGS AND DECISIONS ON THE WATER

SOME SOBERING FACTS

- About half of all boating accidents involve alcohol.
- The U.S. Coast Guard estimates the number of non-fatal boating accidents to be 60,000 or higher with property damage well over \$240 million annually.
- Each year- from 1961, when statistics were first kept, through 1992- boating accidents have claimed over 800 lives, more than in airplane or train accidents, and have injured thousands more. Waterways are second only to highways as the scene of accidental deaths in the country. The Coast Guard and the U.S. Congress recognize alcohol as a significant problem on the water.

Boating Stressors:

STRESSORS COMMONLY AFFECTING HELMSMEN AND PASSENGERS MAKE DRINKING WHILE BOATING EVEN MORE DANGEROUS THAN DRINKING AND DRIVING:

Research shows that four hours of exposure to noise, vibration, sun, glare, wind and other motion on water produces a kind of fatigue, or "boater's hypnosis" which slows reaction time almost as much as if you were legally drunk. Adding alcohol to boating stress factors intensifies their effects- each drink multiplies your accident risk.

BOATING is more fun than driving, right?

No speed limits, no traffic signals, no merging lanes, no potholes. If you think that makes operating a boat under the influence of alcohol safer than drinking and driving, you could be dead wrong. Alcohol affects your ability to function in three critical ways. Your balance, judgment and reaction time are affected almost immediately with the first few drinks.

A FEW BEERS UNDER YOUR BELT CAN PUT YOU UNDER:

Alcohol's effect on your BALANCE can be critical on a boat; simply falling overboard and drowning accounts for at least one in four boating fatalities. When you are "tipsy", the unstable, moving platform of the boat can easily cause you to fall overboard.

Harry is just finishing his second beer. His Blood Alcohol Content is only one-third of what would make him legally drunk. But Harry has "Boater's Hypnosis" and by drinking only two beers during the last hour, he increased his chances of having an accident.

Will Harry risk an accident or the possibility of a \$1,000 federal fine by having another drink? Or will he play it smart and either stop drinking or turn the helm over to a sober skipper?

The alcohol that makes you lose your balance also reduces your body's ability to protect you against the cold water. With alcohol in your blood, the numbing effects of cold water occur much faster than when you are sober. Within minutes, you may not be able to call for help, swim to a float or reach the safety of the boat.

Additionally, imbibing alcohol can lessen motor function, skew judgment and interfere with decision-making ability. In the event of a fall overboard, it can increase the danger of cardiac arrest and some researchers believe drinking increases susceptibility to inner ear disorientation that is said to cause some swimmers to swim down, instead of up, thus increasing the risk of death or serious injury.

ALCOHOL CAN MAKE A BAD SITUATION WORSE:

What else do you lose when you drink? Your JUDGMENT. In skills tests, alcohol-impaired boat operators all reported that they were better operators while intoxicated than sober, despite instrument readings that documented their reduced performance. Alcohol reduced inhibitions, causing normally cautious people to try stunts or enter high-risk situations a sober person would avoid.

ALCOHOL ONLY MAKES YOU THINK YOU ARE PERFORMING BETTER ... AND DRAMATICALLY REDUCES YOUR REACTION TIME:

Alcohol severely diminishes your ability to react to several different signals at once. With the first drink, brain functions are depressed. It takes longer to receive information from your eyes, ears and other senses, and still more time to react. When peripheral vision, focus and depth perception are impaired by alcohol, it is difficult to correctly judge speed and distance, or track moving objects. Reduced night vision and the inability to distinguish red from green make the intoxicated night boater an even greater hazard.

Fact or Fiction

MYTH: Beer is less intoxicating than wine or distilled liquor.

FACT: One 12-oz. beer contains the same amount of alcohol as 5 ounces of 12% wine or 1-1/2 oz. of 80 proof liquor.

MYTH: Diluting hard liquor slows the absorption rates.

FACT: Diluting an alcoholic beverage with water or fruit juice slows absorption. Mixing alcohol with a carbonated beverage increases absorption and intoxicates you more quickly.

MYTH: A cold shower, coffee, physical activity or fresh air will sober you up

FACT: Cold showers and coffee will only produce a clean, wide-awake drunk. Only your liver can detoxify alcohol. For each drink you consume, it takes approximately two hours to sober up.

MYTH: A shot of brandy or whiskey will warm you up.

FACT: In moderate amounts, alcohol dilates the small blood vessels close to the skin, giving a deceptive "glow" of warmth. In fact, the dilated blood vessels reduce your body's ability to guard against heat loss.

MYTH: Alcohol is a stimulant.

FACT: Alcohol is a depressant. It is absorbed directly into the blood stream through the stomach. As blood circulates through your brain, the alcohol depresses body functions and learned restrictions on social behavior. Judgment, balance, vision and reaction time are affected almost immediately.

HOW DO YOU STAY ALERT AND AVOID HAZARDS ON THE WATER?

- Limit your alcohol consumption to one drink or less per hour. Always eat before you drink, and sip your drinks.
- Be aware of the effects of alcohol, both on and in the water. Remember that boating stress factors alone will reduce your ability to function.
- If you expect to have more than one or two drinks per two-hour period, allow a non-drinker to operate the boat.
- Better yet, don't go boating. A responsible boater will refuse to allow an intoxicated or

impaired person to take the helm.

Operation of a boat while intoxicated is a federal offense, subject to a \$1,000 fine. Criminal penalties are as high as \$5,000. Many states are toughening their "Boats and Booze" laws by stiffening penalties and boosting law enforcement efforts. Most states also restrict operating "under the influence". Operating under the influence has a lower threshold Blood Alcohol Content--usually .05%. However, you may be charged with operating under the influence at any point--it is at the discretion of the boating officer based on their perception of how you are functioning as a boat operator.

Banning alcohol from boats is not practical. But moderation and common sense on the water are very practical. When you operate a boat, you accept responsibility for the boat, for the safety of your passengers and crew and for others out enjoying the water.

Alcohol isn't the sport. Boating is the sport. Enjoy it safely!

