

the RED CUP Q&A

separating alcohol fact from fiction

wildfact

Just 1% of the world's water is usable for human consumption. 97% of the world's water is salty or otherwise undrinkable. Another 2% is locked in ice caps and glaciers.

Can you get water poisoning?

Just like over-consuming alcohol, drinking a large amount of water in a short amount of time can be dangerous and even fatal. When consuming too much water, the level of body sodium (salt) drops. This condition even has a name – hyponatremia. It is more commonly called “water intoxication.” In essence, you’re drinking more than your kidneys can process.

The job of sodium is to keep the liquids inside your body in balance. Drinking too much moves liquids from your blood to inside your cells where they swell. What makes this most serious is when the swelling occurs inside your brain and lungs – which can lead to seizures, coma, respiratory arrest, brain stem herniation, and death.

Other symptoms of hyponatremia:

- Frequent urination
- Mental disorientation
- Headache
- Nausea and vomiting

According to Scientific American, death from water intoxication is more common among young people and has been reported in water-drinking contests, hazing episodes, and by athletes who mistakenly over-hydrate while training. Additionally, there have been cases of club-goers taking MDMA (ecstasy) who have died after consuming copious amounts of water trying to rehydrate after long nights of dancing and sweating. The American Chemistry Society reports that it takes about 6 liters of water to kill a 165 pound person.

Hyponatremia requires immediate attention. ER doctors inject concentrated salt water intravenously to reduce swelling.

The take home message is this: unless you are Aquaman, over-consuming water can be risky.

Got a question about alcohol? Email it to redcup@email.arizona.edu



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The Red Cup Q&A is written by Lynn Reyes, LCSW, LISAC, David Salafsky, MPH, Lee Ann Hamilton, MA, CHES, Spencer Gorin, RN, and Christiana Clauson, MPH, in the Health Promotion and Preventive Services (HPPS) department of the UA Campus Health Service.