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Taking score of drinking habits a good thing

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By Emily J. Minor

Special To The Palm Beach Post

Life is a game of numbers. That's pretty clear by now.

Weight. Blood sugars. Good cholesterol, bad.

Real age. Age you feel in the morning. Age you feel when you crawl under the covers at night.

And so it was, with my body and soul in mind, that I ordered the \$25.99 BACtrack breathalyzer from Amazon.com, and I might have even paid for fast shipping.

After all, money's just a number.

Thirty years ago, before Mothers Against Drunk Driving joined forces to fight the important fight, breathalyzer was not an everyday word. We didn't know that .06 meant you're probably OK to drive. We didn't realize it was unwise - indeed, illegal - to get behind the wheel at .11. A breathalyzer test was something that happened to neighborhood drunks after police pulled them over and hauled 'em down to the station.

Of course, this is 2012. Things have changed.

Today you can send someone a little message with your phone - it's called a text - and you can order a breathalyzer and carry it around in your purse.

Mine's actually a keychain, which I naturally keep hidden in a cloth makeup pouch, along with peppermint candies, Tylenol, business cards and my pink drugstore lipstick that is worn to an alarming nub. And this little contraption about the size of a big box of matches has thrown me and my girl posse into quite a tizzy.

Apparently we're a bunch of floozies. And those of us who are not are worried we're right on the edge.

There's no explaining why I ordered the thing, except that one Friday, after a particularly fun evening with some Mojitos, I really began to wonder. It gnawed at me, one of those little obsessions that can lead you to Google in the wee hours of the morning. I hadn't driven. But there I was, 56 years old. (Today's a good day, so I look 55.) I've been drinking since I was 18 years old. (Remember 3.2 beer?) And I'd never measured my blood alcohol. Not once.

Aren't you curious? I was.

And so were all my gal pals.

Right or wrong, this cheap breathalyzer with the little flip-up blow tube became our new obsession. After all, there's more to life than laundry, a Citizens' inspection and the newly discovered 47 percent. There's fun, and fun can lead to dismal decisions. We started our research at my home, when no one else was there, drinking beer and talking and floating in the pool. Our results were fairly reassuring, which we found somewhat alarming. At this age, it's right to be suspicious of good news.

Maybe it's broken. Maybe it's too cheap. Maybe we shouldn't have eaten.

But then, a week or so later, the mister as my driver, I had another date with some Mojitos and began to register more realistic numbers: A 1.1 then a 1.2 then back down to 1.0. (.08 is considered too drunk to drive.) The posse was intrigued, not to mention alarmed. And as I texted out the information: @ Cabanas. Just blew a .11, the responses began to fly in.

How much had I eaten? How many drinks? Had I waited the 15 minutes between drinking and blowing?

Two measly Mojitos and I was at .11?

The next morning, another text. And then my phone rang. And then I got an email with "blood alcohol" in the title line. Whoa, said one. Wow, said another. Just two? That can't be right, said a third. And the little machine that can be both party game and life saver started going with me to baseball games and out to dinner and then on a trip to Ohio, where I forced classmates from 40 years ago to test their resilience to over-indulging.

The thing's probably a germ factory by now. It could never be used as court evidence. It's supposed to be sent back to the company once a year for calibration. And there are a million things that can upset the readings: Listerine. Acid reflux. A cigarette right before you blow. But I guess it's kind of like blood sugar and cholesterol and the presidential polling numbers in Ohio and Florida. It's one of those things that's good to know.

emilyjminor@aol.com



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