



Human Relations Media Newsletter

UNDERAGE DRINKING

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INTRODUCTION

Everywhere teenagers look, it seems that they are bombarded with messages about drinking alcohol. Teen drinking is a hot topic these days; advertisements, television programs, movies, and news reports all frequently feature underage consumption of alcohol. The messages are far from consistent, however. Some sources make drinking seem like a normal, common, and fun activity for teenagers, while others emphasize the dangers of such behavior—and teens, who are still struggling to find their places in the world, may be easily confused.

Unfortunately, such confusion can spell disaster for young people. Underage drinking is a serious and often deadly problem in this country, and it is imperative that teens know the facts about alcohol. Educators should assume part of the responsibility for teaching middle and high schoolers about the consequences of drinking—especially since many young people and their parents mistakenly believe that underage alcohol consumption is a harmless “rite of passage.”

This article aims to explore the many facets of underage drinking so that teens may fully comprehend the potential consequences of such behavior. First, the prevalence of teen alcohol use is discussed; while teen drinking is a serious concern, by no means is “everyone doing it.” The legal consequences for underage drinking are also addressed. The risks of alcohol consumption are described in detail; young

people should fully understand the potentially devastating risks involved in their so-called harmless activities. New research on the effects alcohol can have on the developing teenage brain is also covered.



Next, the common practice of binge drinking is discussed, along with the deadly combination of drinking and driving. A section then explores how alcohol advertising targets teenagers in many ways. Finally, ways that parents can develop a good relationship with their teen and prevent underage drinking are outlined.

Knowledge of the dangers of underage drinking is a key weapon in the fight against the damage, injury and death associated with this behavior. The more teens, parents and educators know about underage drinking, the better prepared they will be to prevent alcohol-related disasters from occurring in their communities.

HOW TEENS USE ALCOHOL

Teens often feel peer pressure to drink alcohol; they may believe that drinking is part of having fun and being cool. Teens may think that “everyone is doing it,” but in reality this is not the case. However, underage drinking remains a serious problem in this country, and parents and educators often underestimate the extent of teen alcohol use.



According to the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, almost half of all teenagers have had at least one drink by the time they reach eighth grade; over 20% report having been drunk. This

number rises sharply through high school, with 80% of high school seniors reporting having used alcohol.

Statistics show that teens drink more frequently than adults might guess. About 20% of eighth graders and 50% of high school seniors report having consumed alcohol in the past 30 days. About 30% of high school seniors report drinking on three or more occasions each month. Teen drinkers make up a major portion of total consumers of alcohol as well. Indeed, 25% of all alcohol sold in the United States is consumed by those under age 21. A full 35% of wine coolers sold in the US are consumed by middle and high school students.

Adults should keep in mind that young people do not drink the same way that they do. While adults may consume a cocktail or two for social reasons, Gary Najarian of the Connecticut Coalition to Stop Underage Drinking explains that teens are “drinking to get drunk.” This excessive attitude puts teenagers at high risk when they drink.

UNDERAGE DRINKING AND THE LAW

Young people are known for risk-taking, but few understand the scope of the consequences they face for the risk of drinking alcohol under age 21. Penalties vary from state to state, but underage drinking is a crime throughout the country.

It is illegal for anyone under the age of 21 to drink, purchase, or possess alcohol in the United States. According to Gary Najarian, “In some states, many of these offenses are misdemeanors, but in other states they can be felonies.” Being criminally charged for alcohol use can have a major effect on a teen’s life. Criminal charges “have severe consequences for the future, especially if they are at the felony level, for being able to go to college, for being able to get a job, being able to make something of yourself,” says Najarian. Possession of a fake ID—identification that has been changed to make a teen appear to be older than he or she is—is also considered a felony in some states.

Teens must also count being charged with a civil offense among the risks of underage drinking. Says Najarian, “If someone injures someone because [he’s] intoxicated, if someone kills [her] friend because [she is]

driving a car intoxicated and [her] friend is a passenger, if they damage someone’s property, they can be sued.”

Teen drinkers are not the only ones who are impacted; their parents can also face severe consequences. Parents who provide their teens with alcohol and/or a place to consume it can be arrested and charged with contributing to the delinquency of a minor. They can also be held responsible for underage drinking in their home even if they were unaware of the incident; if a teen throws a party without his parents’ permission, his parents can still be held liable under civil law. Clearly, anyone who believes underage drinking is harmless need only to review the nation’s drinking laws to understand the seriousness of the act.



RISKS OF UNDERAGE DRINKING

Underage drinking is far from an innocent “rite of passage.” Alcohol is implicated in many accidents, injuries, sexual assaults, and deaths among young people; teens that drink put their very lives on the line.

The Centers for Disease Control report that alcohol is often involved in each of the top four leading causes of death for those under age 20: car crashes, homicide, suicide, and drowning.

Because young people are inexperienced drivers, the addition of alcohol to the equation can be deadly; alcohol-related car crashes alone claim the lives of 10,000 16-to-24-year-olds each year. In addition, alcohol use is reported in 67% of all homicides. Suicide is connected to alcohol as well; when drinking is combined with depression, it can act to push a young person “over the edge.” 68% of drowning deaths are also alcohol-related. Other injuries that teen drinkers face include falls and burns: drinkers are 16 times more likely than non-drinkers to die in a fall and ten times more likely to be burn victims than non-drinkers. All in all, alcohol kills 6.5 times more teens than all other illicit drugs combined.



Drinking alcohol plays a large role in sexual assault and high-risk sex. One study found that 58% of females and 75% of males involved in date rape had been drinking or using drugs. Even when the sex is consensual, young people who drink are more likely to have multiple partners and are much less likely to practice safe sex, thereby exposing themselves to unwanted pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV/AIDS.

Alcohol poisoning is another serious risk confronted by teen drinkers. Hundreds of young people under the age of 15 go to the emergency room each year for alcohol poisoning. Alcohol poisoning is severe elevation of blood alcohol concentration, which may result in a coma or death.

When large amounts of alcohol are drunk in a short time, the body’s involuntary processes like breathing and heartbeat can slow or stop. Even if a victim becomes unconscious from drinking too much, the alcohol continues to circulate in his or her system and can lead to cardiac arrest. Coma and

death are possible if the blood alcohol concentration reaches 0.3% or higher.

Underage drinking can have catastrophic effects on a young person’s life. Adults as well as teens should understand the many risks involved in drinking alcohol.

ALCOHOL AND THE TEEN BRAIN

The dangers of underage drinking go beyond the increased risk of injury or death; recent research suggests that drinking alcohol during the teen years can result in irreparable brain damage and an increased likelihood for alcoholism. Because the teen brain is still developing, alcohol has a much greater effect on it than it does on the mature brain.

During adolescence, hormones shift quickly and new networks are formed in the brain; if alcohol plays a role during this developmental period, cognitive impairment could result. Recent studies have found that the hippocampus and the prefrontal cortex are the areas most at risk for an underage drinker. The hippocampus is involved in learning and memory, and the prefrontal cortex is involved in decision-making; excessive alcohol consumption could cause young people to lose motor skills, lower their ability to perform on tests, and increase the difficulty of learning new things.

This damage is physically detectable; a study at the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center found that the hippocampus of an underage drinker is, on average, ten percent smaller than that of a non-drinker. This information is especially troubling in light of the fact that it takes half as much alcohol to damage the brain of a teen than it does to damage the brain of an adult.



Besides being vulnerable to damage from alcohol, teen drinkers are also more likely to become alcoholics later in life. A study published in the *American Journal of Psychiatry* reported that the adolescent brain is organized for highly motivated exploration of the world in order to learn how to live as an adult. Therefore, novel experiences are especially motivating to teens. Teen brains are also very plastic, meaning they can change in response to exposure to certain elements, like alcohol. The adolescent attraction to new experiences combined with the plastic nature of the brain can make the teen brain more vulnerable to addiction. In short, chemical changes resulting from alcohol can “hardwire” the teen brain for alcoholism. The numbers support these ideas: studies show that people who begin drinking before age 15 are four times more likely to become alcoholics than those who begin at age 20 or older.

BINGE DRINKING

Young drinkers face a large number of risks, and they increase these risks by drinking large amounts of alcohol. Binge drinking is defined as having five or more drinks in a row for boys and four or more drinks in a row for girls. Drinking in excess is unfortunately a very common way to consume alcohol among teenagers; because they “drink to get drunk” rather than enjoy a social drink or two, teens place themselves in greater danger of suffering



from car crashes, injuries, alcohol poisoning and brain damage.

According to the US Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services, almost seven million people ages 12 to 20 binge drink at least once a month. Another survey found that about one third of high school seniors reported at least one occasion of binge drinking in the past two weeks.

Consuming drink after drink or shot after shot is often considered normal, rather than harmful, behavior among teens.

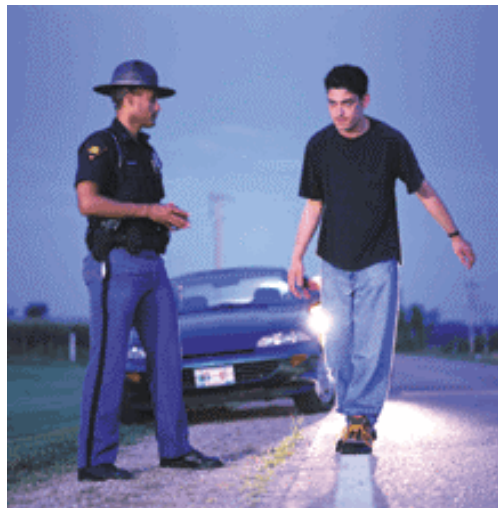
Binge drinking is not harmless fun, however. Teens who frequently binge are much more likely than non-bingers to do something they later regret, get behind in schoolwork, become injured, damage property, and get in trouble with the police. They also put themselves at a higher risk for alcohol poisoning because, by consuming many drinks in a row, they do not feel the negative effects of the alcohol until it is too late.

DRINKING AND DRIVING

One of the most dangerous combinations for a teenager is drinking alcohol and driving. Automobile crashes are the leading cause of death for young people, and inexperience coupled with alcohol can lead to devastating effects.

It is illegal for anyone, of any age, to drive while intoxicated in the United States, though individual states have different definitions of intoxication. However, all states have a “Zero Tolerance” policy for those under age 21. An underage driver who has a blood alcohol concentration above 0.00% will face legal consequences, ranging from fines to jail time (in some states, the law allows the blood alcohol concentration to fall between 0.00% and 0.02% to account for variations in alcohol testing instruments). In addition, a drunk driver who damages property or injures another person can be civilly sued.

Drunk driving is a serious problem in this country, causing huge amounts of property damage, injury, and death. Young people are among the hardest hit; the rate of fatal car crashes involving drunk drivers ages 16 to 20 is more than twice that of the rate for crashes involving drunk drivers 21 or older.



ALCOHOL MARKETING AND TEENS

Underage drinking is a serious problem, but teens still receive mixed messages about alcohol because advertisers go out of their way to target young people. Alcohol companies know that teens tend to binge drink, and they know that habits formed early in life tend to persist. Teens are the ideal consumers for their risky products, so these companies put their profits before young people's welfare.

Alcohol companies place ads where they know teens will see them. Content analysis studies have discovered that magazines with high numbers of teen readers also had the highest number of alcohol ads. Magazines such as Vibe, Rolling Stone, Maxim, Glamour, and Sports Illustrated have an audience composed of at least 25% young people. In fact, the ten magazines with this high youth readership account for almost one third of all magazine alcohol ads. For every million more readers a magazine has in the 12 to 19 age group, it will have 60% more ads for beer or liquor.

Television ads for alcohol also reach a large youth audience. Studies show that

the average young person was exposed to 245 alcohol ads in 2001 alone. One in every four commercials is more likely to be seen by someone under age 21 than by an adult. A television market study found that alcohol commercials appear in 13 of the 15 most popular shows with teens. Not only are teens being exposed to alcohol commercials, the ads portray drinking as a fun, sexy, and young thing to do. Says Gary Najarian, "There are these party scenes which show

that drinking means you're having fun, that you're hanging out with models that are in bikinis." Such portrayals lead teens to form unrealistic attitudes about drinking.

Alcohol companies have also developed new products that appeal to teens. Malt liquors known as alco-pops are designed to look and taste like non-alcoholic beverages already popular with young people. Alco-pops like SKYY Blue® and Smirnoff Ice® are marketed to

appeal to someone who doesn't (yet) like the taste of alcohol; adds Najarian, "Some of the packaging and labeling looks very similar to the regular fruity drinks that kids are already drinking." The hope is that teens will begin drinking a company's alco-pop and move on to its harder liquor as they grow older.

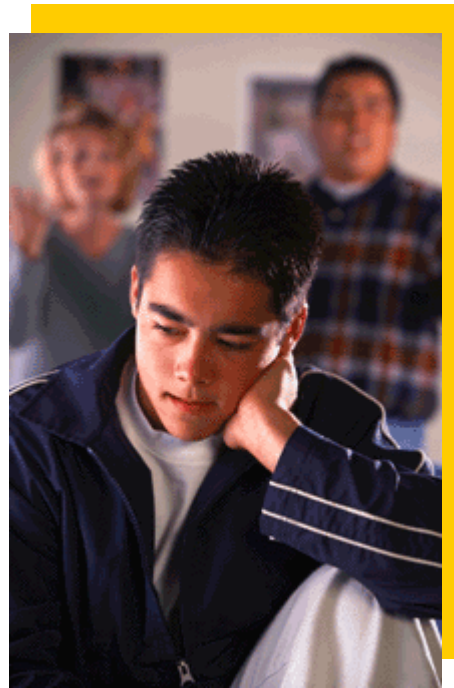


PARENTS AND PREVENTION

Parents may not realize it, but they exert a strong influence over their children's choice to drink alcohol while underage. Says Gary Najarian, "No teen will ever admit this, but studies have shown that the number one influence in young people's lives is their parents and what their parents' expectations of them are." The National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism reports that family factors like parent-child relationships, communication, discipline and supervision have a significant effect on teen alcohol use.

The best way for parents to prevent underage drinking is to develop a loving, open relationship with their teens. Parents should spend time talking with their children each day and should get involved in their children's lives. By letting their children know that their interests and activities are worthwhile, they set the stage for the development of strong self-esteem. Parents who have an open communication with their teens will find discussing the difficult subject of alcohol a much easier task.

Parents should also make their expectations regarding drinking alcohol clear. Teens should understand the consequences of breaking the rules, and parents should take care to consistently enforce them. Teens should also know that they can call their parents if they end up at a party where alcohol is available; parents should be thankful that their children made the decision to call them rather than get in the car with an intoxicated friend. Parents who want to discourage underage drinking should also



be good role models for their teens; by not drinking or drinking in a responsible manner, parents reinforce the rules and make it more likely that teens will respect their wishes.

The best way to prevent teens from suffering from the dangers of underage drinking is for their parents to discuss the topic with them honestly, set ground rules and stick to them, and be good role models themselves. Parents should recognize that they are the number one influence on their children's behavior and take full advantage of their power to ensure a healthy, happy life for their teens.

RESOURCES

Internet Websites

- Connecticut Coalition to Stop Underage Drinking
www.preventionworksct.org/ctcoal_home.html
- National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence (NCADD)
www.ncadd.org/facts/youthalc.html
- National Institute on Alcohol Abuse & Alcoholism
www.niaaa.nih.gov
- Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration
<http://family.samhsa.gov>

Videos for Teens

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|---|---------------|
| Binge Drinking: The Facts | grades 7 – 12 |
| Brain Scans: Alcohol and the Teenage Brain | grades 7 – 12 |
| Confronting Drunk Driving | grades 7 – 12 |
| Getting Stupid: How Drugs Damage Your Brain | grades 6 – 8 |
| The Underage Drinking Toolkit | grades 7 – 12 |
| Underage Drinking: Know the Facts, Know the Risks | grades 7 – 12 |
| What is Alcoholism? | grades 7 – 12 |

Videos for Adults

- Alcohol and the Teenage Brain for Parents and Professionals
- Underage Drinking for Parents and Professionals

Pamphlets for Adults

- Underage Drinking: What Parents Need to Know

Pamphlets for Teens

- Focus on Alcohol
- Focus on Underage Drinking

Overhead Transparency Kits for Teens

- The Dangers of Alcohol