NCADD
NATIONAL COUNCIL ON ALCOHOLISM AND DRUG DEPENDENCE, INC.

Underage and College Drinking

Alcohol is widely available and aggressively promoted throughout society. It is the most commonly used and abused drug among youth in the United States -- more than tobacco and illicit drugs -- and although drinking by persons under the age of 21 is illegal, people aged 12 to 20 drink 11% of all alcohol consumed in the United States.

But, early use of alcohol can draw young people into a host of problems and aggravate existing ones. Each year, approximately **5,000 young people under the age of 21 die as a result of underage drinking**. This includes about 1,900 deaths from motor vehicle crashes, 1,600 as a result of homicides, 300 from suicide, and hundreds from other injuries such as falls, burns, and drownings.

And, approximately 600,000 college students are unintentionally injured while under the influence of alcohol. Approximately 700,000 students are assaulted by other students who have been drinking and about 100,000 students are victims of alcohol-related sexual assault or date rape (from NCADD Fact Sheet: Facts About Underage Drinking).

Yet over 11,000 teens in the United States try using alcohol for the first time every day and more than four million drink alcohol in any given month.

Why do some young people drink alcohol?

Young people, like adults, drink alcohol for many different reasons. Some of the reasons may seem obvious, but understanding the feelings behind these reasons--as well as how everyday teen life comes into play--can be difficult.

- Young people often drink to check out from family problems or issues with school/grades
- Loneliness, low self–esteem, depression, anxiety disorder and other mental health issues lead many young people to drink alcohol
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Young people turn to alcohol to deal with the pressures of everyday social situations
- Young people may drink to change their image or to fit in when moving to a new school or town
- Young people may drink to gain confidence or lose inhibitions
- Young people are more likely to start experimenting with alcohol if they have parents who drink and if their parents don't give them clear messages about not drinking (See “What Should I Tell My Child About Drinking”)

What are the Risks?

Whatever it is that leads adolescents to begin drinking, once they start they face a number of potential health and safety risks. Young people who drink are more likely to be sexually active and to have unsafe, unprotected sex; are more likely to be involved in a fight, commit violent crimes, fail at school, use other drugs, and experience verbal, physical, or sexual violence. And those who start drinking before age 15 are five times more likely to develop alcoholism later in life than those who begin drinking at age 21. (See “NCADD Fact Sheet On Underage Drinking”)

Preventing Underage Drinking:

Underage drinking is a complex problem, requiring cooperation at all levels of society. Three basic approaches, however, have proven to be effective in prevention of the problem:

- curtailing the availability of alcohol;
- consistent enforcement of existing laws and regulations; and
- changing norms and behaviors through education. (See “Tips for Prevention”)

Binge Drinking Is High Risk Drinking

Binge drinking is defined as a pattern of alcohol consumption that brings the blood alcohol concentration (BAC) level to 0.08% or more in a short period of time. This pattern of drinking alcohol usually in less than 2 hours, corresponds to:

- 5 or more drinks for men or
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4 or more drinks for women.

Plain and simple, it is high risk drinking.

ALCOHOL POISONING: A MEDICAL EMERGENCY

Hundreds of people die each year from acute alcohol intoxication--known as alcohol poisoning or alcohol overdose. And, thousands of others are admitted to emergency rooms. Alcohol poisoning is increasing in high schools and on college campuses. Plain and simple, Drinking Too Much Too Fast Can Kill You. **Alcohol poisoning is a medical emergency.**

Alcohol (a depressant drug), once ingested, works to slow down some of the body's functions including heart rate, blood pressure, and breathing. When the vital centers have been depressed enough by alcohol, unconsciousness occurs. Further, the amount of alcohol that it takes to produce unconsciousness is dangerously close to a fatal dose. People who survive alcohol poisoning sometimes suffer irreversible brain damage.

Many students are surprised to learn that death can occur from acute intoxication. Most think the worst that can happen is they'll pass out and have a hang-over the next day. Knowing the signs and symptoms of acute alcohol intoxication and the proper action to take can help you avoid a tragedy.

Signs and Symptoms of Alcohol Poisoning

- Unconsciousness or semi-consciousness
- Slow respirations (breaths) of eight or less per minute, or lapses between respirations of more than eight seconds.
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Cold, clammy, pale, or bluish skin.

- In the event of alcohol poisoning, these signs and symptoms will most likely be accompanied by a strong odor of alcohol.
- While these are obvious signs of alcohol poisoning, the list is certainly not all inclusive.

Appropriate Action

- If you encounter a person who exhibits one or more of the signs and symptoms, do what you would do in any medical emergency: **Call 911 immediately.**
- While waiting for 911 emergency transport, gently turn the intoxicated person on his/her side and maintain that position by placing a pillow in the small of the person's back. This is important to prevent aspiration (choking) should the person vomit. Stay with the person until medical help arrives.

Countless studies have shown that binge drinking use by youth and young adults increases the risk of both fatal and nonfatal injuries. Research has also shown that youth who use alcohol before age 15 are five times more likely to become alcohol dependent than adults who begin drinking at age 21. Other consequences of youth alcohol use include increased risky sexual behaviors, poor school performance, increased risk of being a victim of violence or sexual assault and increased risk of suicide and homicide.

For additional information, Learn About Alcohol, Learn About Drugs or Get Help may be helpful.