TEENAGE DRINKING: TOO MUCH, TOO SOON... TOO RISKY
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## Sources
- National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA)
- Mothers Against Drunk Drivers (MADD)
- University of Texas School of Public Health
- Harvard School of Public Health College Alcohol Study
- Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration
Underage drinking is the number one youth drug problem in the United States. It kills or injures more young people each year than all other drugs combined. Teen-agers are at greater risk than adults for developing alcoholism or life-long patterns of alcohol abuse.

Most people aged 12 to 18 do not drink alcohol. For your health, safety and well-being, keep it that way!

When you're young, life is new, exciting, fun, scary and confusing. To learn about life, you take chances, make choices, make mistakes, and learn from it all. It's a natural process.

Remember when you learned how to ride a bicycle? You probably fell off a few times before you got the hang of it. Life is a bit like learning to ride a bike. You take risks and sometimes everything works out. Other times, you take a chance and things don’t work out. It's the normal ups and downs of living.

Some risks, like drinking alcohol, aren’t worth taking, or at least not until you’re older. When you’re older, you’ll know more about what you’re doing, more of who you want to be, and more about what you want in life. As a young person, you may be tempted or curious to try alcohol. When the time comes, will you know what to do?

That's what this section is about: getting to know alcohol, what it does to your body and brain, why you may be tempted to try it, the dangers alcohol poses to your health and safety and how to say no.

• Write a newspaper-style story about your very first impression of alcohol. Perhaps it was the first time you saw an adult drinking a beer. Perhaps you were offered a drink at a party and turned it down. Maybe you’ve just seen actors drinking wine on television or in a movie. Whatever your experience, what were your first impressions of alcohol? What is your impression of alcohol now?

• Search through newspapers and magazines for photographs of people with alcoholic beverages. Cut them out and paste each on a large sheet of paper or poster board. What emotions are the people in the pictures expressing? Discuss these photos with your class. What do the photos tell you about the way advertisers and society in general view alcohol consumption?
Alcohol is a drug, just like marijuana, cocaine, ecstasy or heroin. Alcohol is a ‘depressant,’ which means it slows the function of the central nervous system. It blocks some of the messages trying to get to the brain. This alters your perceptions, emotions, vision, hearing, physical coordination, reaction times and judgment.

After you drink alcohol, it passes through your stomach and small intestine and is absorbed into your bloodstream. From there it travels to the rest of your body, including your brain. It is processed out of your body by your liver.

It takes your liver 60 minutes to process one drink, or one unit of alcohol. No matter how fast a person drinks, it still takes the liver one hour to process one drink.

Alcohol’s effects can be felt 10 to 20 minutes after drinking, or sooner on an empty stomach. Females are more affected by alcohol than males since they are usually smaller and have more relative body fat and less body water. This makes the concentration of the same amount of alcohol in a female’s body higher than in a male’s.

If a teen-ager consumes alcohol in large quantities, it does more potential damage to his or her body than it does to an adult’s. Drinking alcohol on a regular basis can injure a teen-ager’s developing brain, liver and other organs. Adding alcohol to this growing process is like filling a new automobile with bad gasoline; it could cause permanent damage to the engine.
1 - 2 Drinks:
The amount of alcohol in blood, called blood alcohol concentration (BAC), is about .04. You feel more social. You may have a warm physical glow. Smaller individuals should not drive.

3 - 4 Drinks:
Your blood alcohol concentration (BAC) is probably above the legal limit of .08. No one should drive a car at this stage. You may be socially uninhibited. Your judgment is impaired and your reflexes are slow.

5 - 6 Drinks:
BAC level is around .14. Lack of concentration, poor coordination, unstable emotions and slurred speech are common.

7+ Drinks:
Your BAC is more than twice the legal limit. You may be goggy and just halfway alert. You may fall asleep or pass out. This is a dangerous zone. Death or injury from alcohol poisoning becomes possible.

Contrary to popular belief, beer and wine are not "safer" than liquor. One 12-ounce beer has roughly as much alcohol as a 1.5-ounce shot of liquor (whiskey, vodka, rum), a five-ounce glass of wine or one wine cooler.

Beer usually contains 3 percent to 5 percent alcohol. Wine has 9 percent to 16 percent. Hard liquor usually contains the highest levels — up to 50 percent.

Zero Tolerance is Serious Business

Many states now practice zero-tolerance laws for people under 21 years old, which means you are breaking the law if you have ANY alcohol in your system. If you are caught with any alcohol on your breath whatsoever, you can lose your driver’s license, pay a large fine or have your car taken away -- permanently.

Activities

• Research the legal penalties for underage drinking and drinking while driving in your state. Do you think these penalties are strong enough to keep teen-agers from drinking or from drinking and driving? Discuss.

• As you study this section about alcohol, watch your newspaper for articles about underage drinking, and drinking and driving. Clip the articles and keep them posted on a bulletin board or wall in your classroom.
Oh, yeah? Well, maybe you should be scared.

Research shows that many people inherit a vulnerability to alcoholism. In other words, alcoholism is in their genes. It’s a disease, also known as alcohol dependence. Just as a diabetic’s body does not process sugar properly, an alcoholic’s body does not process alcohol properly.

Along with the genes a person inherits, lifestyle is also a factor. Your friends, the amount of stress in your life and how readily available alcohol is also are factors that may increase your risk for alcoholism.

The younger you are, the easier it is to become addicted to alcohol. A teen-ager’s body adapts to alcohol more quickly than an adult’s and may become dependent on it. Your body and brain do not stop growing until about age 20. Young, growing bodies absorb alcohol quickly, like a sponge. Growing cells adapt more easily to new “fuels” like alcohol and then change their chemical and physical make-up to use this new fuel.

If a person drinks alcoholic beverages in excess regularly, your cells get used to it, and demand more of it. A body predisposed to the disease of alcoholism can quickly become addicted to alcohol. A person may begin craving alcohol. The body builds up a tolerance to alcohol, requiring more of it to stay satisfied. The more alcohol an alcoholic drinks, the more serious damage is done to internal organs, the brain, not to mention the person’s life and relationships.

FACT: Teen-agers can become an alcoholic within six to 18 months of taking their very first drink.

FACT: if you start drinking before you’re 15 years old, you are four times more likely to develop alcoholism than if you wait until you’re 21.

According to “Teenage Drinking,” a Parent Resource Institute for Drug Education (PRIDE) report, more than one-third of America’s alcoholics (3.3 million) are under the legal drinking age. That means more than three out of 10 alcoholics in this country are under the age of 20.

Do you think such teen-agers planned to become alcoholics? Of course not. They probably started by having a few drinks because they were curious, or someone convinced them it would be fun.

Alcohol Abuse

Not everyone who drinks a lot of alcohol is an alcoholic. Many teens are alcohol abusers. They may not be physically addicted to alcohol, but they drink enough to cause serious trouble in their lives. They may even start to believe they NEED alcohol to behave a certain way or to cope with their lives. Over time, alcohol abusers may also become physically addicted to alcohol as their bodies adjust and create a need for the drug.
Characteristics of alcohol dependence or alcoholism:

- Craving: A strong need, or compulsion, to drink
- Loss of control: The inability to stop drinking once a person has started
- Physical dependence: Withdrawal symptoms, such as nausea, sweating, shakiness and anxiety, when alcohol use is stopped after heavy drinking. Symptoms usually disappear with more alcohol consumption.
- Tolerance: The need for increasing amounts of alcohol in order to get "high"

Alcohol Abuse: It can ruin your life

Alcohol abuse does not involve a physical craving for alcohol, but it does involve:

- Failure to fulfill school, home or work responsibilities
- Dangerous, risky behavior, such as driving a car or operating machinery while drunk
- Alcohol-related legal problems, such as being arrested for driving under the influence of alcohol, or physically hurting someone while drunk
- Continuing to drink despite ongoing relationship problems caused or worsened by the effects of alcohol

If you or someone you know experiences any of these symptoms, go to the middle of this section now for help.

FACT: Binge drinking (five or more drinks in a row) can lead to death.

- Alcohol poisoning

Symptoms include unconsciousness, shallow breathing, looks blue, slow heart beat, possible vomiting. Get medical help immediately!

- Permanent liver damage
- Heart failure
- Hypothermia (Body temperature drops drastically)
- Coma and seizures
- Breathing stops
- Death

MOST COMMON: Teens can die from alcohol by choking on their vomit. If you vomit when you are unconscious you can easily breathe it in, choke to death, or suffer brain damage from lack of oxygen.

- At times, growing up can be confusing and difficult. Cut out words or letters from the headlines in your newspaper to form words to describe how you feel when you have a problem or a bad day. Paste them on a large poster or sheet of paper. Next to each word, write a brief description of positive steps you can take to deal with your problem or bad feelings. If you get stuck, ask for your teacher's advice.

- Cut out photos from the newspaper that show people who are experiencing trouble. How might their problems worsen if they decide to drink alcohol to escape them?
DO YOU KNOW SOMEONE WITH A DRINKING PROBLEM?
If you, someone you love or a friend has one or more of these warning signs, seek help:

- Doesn't recall things recently said or done
- Gets drunk regularly
- Has frequent hangovers
- Lies about how much alcohol he or she is drinking
- Believes alcohol is necessary to have a good time
- Feels run-down, depressed or suicidal
- Has blackouts or forgets what was said or done while drinking
- Has problems at school or gets in trouble with the police

(source: National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism)

If you can answer yes to any one of these questions, maybe it's time you took a serious look at what drinking might be doing to you:

1. Do you drink because you have problems? To relax?
2. Are your grades starting to slip? Are you goofing off on your job?
3. Do you drink when you get mad at other people, your friends or parents?
4. Do you drink alone rather than with others?
5. Did you ever try to stop drinking or drink less, and fail?
6. Have you started to drink in the morning, before school or work?
7. Do you gulp your drinks?
8. Do you ever have memory loss due to your drinking?
9. Do you lie about your drinking?
10. Do you ever get into trouble when you're drinking?
11. Do you get drunk when you drink, even when you don't mean to?
12. Do you think it's cool to be able to hold your liquor?

(source: Alcoholics Anonymous)

- A parent or grandparent, an aunt or uncle, a doctor, a counselor, a teacher or another trusted adult
- Al-Anon/Alateen: 1-888-4AL-ANON (1-888-425-2666)
- Alcoholics Anonymous: Look in the phone book under “Alcoholics Anonymous” or visit www.aa.org to locate an AA chapter near you
- Girls and Boys Town National Hotline: 1-800-448-3000 (24 hours a day)
- National Clearinghouse for Alcohol and Drug Information: 800-729-6686

- Find community events listings in your newspaper. Are there meetings for Alcoholics Anonymous, Alateen or other alcohol support groups? Research one of these groups by interviewing program administrators and write a brief newspaper article about how these groups help individuals with drinking problems.
Alcohol is bad for your health. It's also bad for your behavior and may create lifelong trouble or consequences.

Because alcohol distorts your judgment, you're more apt to make risky decisions. As a teen-ager, you're making the transition between childhood and adulthood. It takes time to learn to be a responsible adult. Drinking alcohol can disrupt this process.

For example, you might drink a few beers and decide to drive a car. What if you crash, threatening your life and the lives of others? Alcohol and automobiles do not mix. Never drink and drive.

You might drink enough alcohol to impair your judgment, so that you do things you would never normally do. While under the influence of alcohol, you may want to have sex, even though you know that you and your partner are not ready emotionally. Because you're impaired, you do not use protection to guard against pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases.

What happens if you get pregnant? What happens if she gets pregnant? What happens if you contract a sexually transmitted disease? People can make some bad choices while under the influence of alcohol.

Some teen-agers may try alcohol out of curiosity, because of peer pressure or to make them feel better -- temporarily -- about problems at home or at school. This is a very bad choice because alcohol doesn't solve problems. Only you can. Besides, it's awfully hard to solve problems effectively when you're intoxicated. But many teen-agers fall into this trap without realizing what's happening.
FACT: Alcohol kills more teen-agers than any other drug. How? By making teens behave in dangerous ways, such as driving cars while intoxicated, fighting, or being too drunk to recognize dangers such as heights, water, becoming a victim of crime and generally taking risks they wouldn’t ordinarily take.

FACT: Frequent binge drinkers are eight times more likely than non-binge drinkers to miss a class, fall behind in schoolwork, get hurt or injured and damage property.

FACT: Studies show that teen-age girls who binge drink are up to 63% more likely to become teen mothers.

FACT: A large number of convicted rape and sexual assault offenders said they were drinking at the time of their crime.

FACT: Alcohol can hurt you—even if you’re not the one drinking. If you’re around people who are drinking, you have an increased risk of being seriously injured, involved in car crashes or affected by violence. At the least, you may have to deal with people who are sick, out of control or unable to take care of themselves.

ACTIVITIES

• Watch your newspaper for stories involving drinking and driving crashes. Discuss the risks involved in drinking and driving with your class. Make a list of suggestions for how to keep people who’ve been drinking from driving a car while intoxicated.

• Have you known someone who has participated in risky behavior while intoxicated? Write a letter to her describing your feelings about the situation. How did it make you feel to watch him or hear about her doing something risky or dangerous? Did you worry about his safety, or the safety of others? Do you think she was acting responsibly? How could he have done things differently? How did alcohol influence her choices?

• Find articles in the newspaper about teen-agers who have made bad decisions, even fatal decisions, while intoxicated. Can you imagine other situations in which drinking alcohol might lead to dangerous or risky behavior?
It's no secret. Unlike most illicit drugs, alcohol is easy to get, even if you're under the legal drinking age.

Although state laws say you must be 21 to purchase and drink alcohol, most people age 13 to 20 said they could get their hands on alcohol this week, according to a recent survey. One-fourth of all alcohol sold in this country is believed to be consumed by individuals under 20.

Although most teens say they do not drink alcohol, there are some who drink a lot. And that's a big problem. Why? Because, unlike some adults who enjoy an occasional glass of wine with dinner, or a beer during the big game, studies show the majority of young people who drink do so for one reason: to get drunk.

If you've been to a party where young people were drinking, what happened? Chances are, the alcohol drinkers didn't have just one or two drinks, and then stop. They probably drank several with the goal of getting drunk.

As we've learned, binge drinking, or having five or more drinks in a row, can lead to all kinds of problems, including death.

Considering what you now know about alcohol, what will you decide to do?
Peer Pressure:

Peer pressure can make you do some risky things. Have your friends ever dared you to jump off a tall fence? Burp as loud as you can? Wear a certain type of clothing to “fit in?” This is peer pressure and we’re all victims of it. We want to fit in. And a little bit of trying to fit in can be OK. It’s normal, as long as it doesn’t compromise your personal values or standards.

Learning to say no

When someone asks you to do something unhealthy, dangerous or risky, like drinking alcohol, you need to know how to stand up and say no.

Some teen-agers say no with little explanation. Others claim they don’t feel like it, they’re not “into” drinking, they have a game or a concert tomorrow and don’t want to feel bad, or they say they know a family member who died from drinking. Others might avoid situations altogether where drinking might take place.

However you decide to say no, think about your method before anyone asks. Have an answer that makes sense to you and the person asking. It can be difficult to say no when you’re pressured in front of others, but with a little thought, you can come up with a smart way to handle yourself without feeling rejected or left out. Most of all, be assertive.

Growing up isn’t easy. You’re trying to figure out how to live your life, how to be an adult and what you want from life. If you’re experiencing trouble at home or at school, you may find yourself tempted to “escape” your problems by drinking. Funny thing is, your problems will still be there when you sober up. Only now, you have a hangover or worse, a drinking problem.

If you feel tempted to numb your pain or resolve problems with alcohol, or if you’ve already done so, talk with a trusted teacher, adult friend, family member or parent. Be honest about your feelings. If a trusted adult isn’t available, go to the center pages of this section for ideas where you can find help to deal with your problems without drinking alcohol.

Life isn’t always easy. But drinking or taking drugs to make the trouble go away is NOT a smart solution. Studies show that teens with high self-esteem do not drink. It’s pretty simple: The better you feel about yourself, the less likely you’ll want to drink.

Activities

• Look through your newspaper for activities a teen-ager might engage in instead of drinking alcohol. Make a list on a chalkboard or large poster. As a class, list the positive effects of participating in each type of activity. In a separate list, detail the possible consequences of drinking alcohol. Discuss with your classmates.

• What’s important to you? Make a list of 10 things important to you right now. Then, make a separate list of 10 things you’d like to do in your lifetime. How could drinking threaten the things you hold important today? Tomorrow?
It's normal to be curious about drinking. It's legal for adults. You see other people drinking, it might even look like a fun way to kill time. But what if it kills you? What if it makes you sick? Causes you to make a risky choice? What if it makes you look silly in front of a person who's important to you? What if it causes you to lose respect in the eyes of someone you love or admire? What if nothing bad happens this time, so you decide to drink again? What if something bad happens the next time?

Consider the risks discussed in this section. Do you want to risk discovering that you're an alcoholic just because you're curious or bored? Do you really think losing control of your body and emotions sounds like a good time? How about getting sick? Does that sound like fun?

There are lots of things to do besides drink alcohol. Here's a small sample of some healthy, enjoyable ways to spend your time.

• Read a book, magazine, newspaper or comic book
• Take a walk, exercise
• Write in a journal
• Bake a cake or make a homemade pizza
• Call a friend
• Try a new hobby or activity
• Draw a picture, sing a song, write a story or listen to music
• Help someone with chores
• Daydream
We've given you the nuts and bolts of alcohol and alcohol abuse. Also, we've provided you with the right information to make healthy decisions about drinking.

Now, let's take a look in the mirror. How do you feel about that image staring back? Do you respect yourself enough to say 'no' to the unhealthy risks that come with abusing alcohol?

- Role play situations in which a fellow student or peer may try to convince you to drink alcohol. Take turns trying out different ways of saying no. Discuss each method with the class. Which methods seem most effective?

- Look through the newspaper for stories and photos about activities that do not involve drinking alcohol. Research and write a newspaper story about an event or activity that is new to you. Remember to answer the questions who, what, when, where, why and how. If you can, do this activity or go to this event and write a review about the experience.

- If you think your self-esteem could use some work, or you're not quite sure how you feel about yourself, take this simple test. Answer true or false to the following statements.

  1. I deserve love and respect.
  2. I don't need others to tell me I have done a good job.
  3. Being myself is important.
  4. I don't need others' approval to feel good.
  5. I don't feel guilty about doing or saying what I want.

If you said 'true' to most of these, you're in good shape. You like yourself. If you said 'false' to two or more, you may want to examine how you think about yourself. If you need help doing this, ask a trusted adult. You deserve to answer 'true' to each statement.

The easiest way to earn the respect of others is to like and respect yourself. That's all there is to it! How you value or think about yourself speaks volumes about the way you choose to live your life. We can't all grow up to be brilliant scientists or rock stars. But we can choose to focus on improving the good things we have: our talents, skills, interests, life experiences and relationships.

The goal is to like and respect yourself enough to live a healthy, happy life. Speaking of fitting in, alcohol abuse rarely fits in with a healthy, happy life.