

Underage Drinking

According to the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, alcohol is the most widely used substance among America's youth. Although it is illegal for people under 21 years of age to drink alcohol, adolescents and young adults from 12-20 years of age drink almost 4% of all alcohol consumed in the United States. While youth drink less often than adults, adolescents tend to consume higher quantities of alcohol per occasion. In fact, statistics show that 90% of all alcohol drinks consumed by youth are consumed through binge drinking.



Teens may try drinking for a variety of reasons including peer pressure, to escape stress, to fit in socially, or even boredom. Teens may also experiment with alcohol because of misinformation, not fully recognizing the risks associated with underage drinking. In addition, many teens report that alcohol is easy to access. In 2021, among adolescents who reported drinking alcohol in the past month, 99.7% of 12-14 year-olds and 84.7% of 15-17 year-olds reported getting it for free, (National Survey on Drug Use and Health, SAMHSA). In many cases, adolescents have access to alcohol through friends or family members or find it at home.

According to the American Academy of Pediatrics, underage drinking is a serious health issue and poses a range of adverse consequences. First and foremost, it is important to recognize that the teenage brain is more vulnerable to alcohol than the adult brain. This is because the teenage years are a critical time for brain growth. As such, underage drinking can interfere with normal brain development and change the brain over time. Specifically, frequent alcohol use can have a negative impact on regions of the brain that handle decision-making, learning, and memory. Additionally, alcohol can pave the way for addiction when the brain is still maturing. Several studies have found that early-onset drinking is linked to the risk of greater substance abuse problems later in life. Research shows that people who start drinking before the age of 15 are more than 5 times more likely to develop an alcohol use disorder later in life, compared to those who only drank after reaching the legal age of 21. The risk of developing an alcohol use disorder is even higher among teens who have a family member who has struggled with addiction. Teens who drink are also more likely to experience problems in school, social problems, adverse mental health issues (including a higher risk of suicide), abuse of other drugs, and legal problems, compared to teens who abstain from alcohol until the legal age of 21.

While educators and other youth-serving advocates can play a meaningful role in preventing underage drinking, parents and caregivers are a leading influence in shaping a young person's attitude toward alcohol use. Research shows that parents are the number one reason kids decide not to drink (American Academy of Pediatrics). Prevention starts by engaging in ongoing conversations about alcohol use. Keeping lines of communication open with children and teens can build trust and help them feel more comfortable to ask questions and share concerns. Prevention experts recommend the below tips when talking with kids about alcohol:

- Emphasize that you want your child/teen to be safe and healthy now and throughout their life.
- Rely on information from credible resources such as the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA or NIDA Teen), National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism or the Partnership to End Addiction.
- Talk honestly about the dangers of underage drinking and establish clear rules about not drinking while underage.
- Emphasize that drinking or buying alcohol before age 21 is illegal.
- Normalize non-use. Acknowledge that even though many kids do develop drinking problems, national studies show that most teens stay away from alcohol during middle and high school.
- Help youth plan how to handle peer pressure and set expectations about what they should do if offered alcohol (i.e., “If there is alcohol at a party, call me and I’ll pick you up”).
- Talk about choices and consequences to help them take responsibility for their decisions.
- Teach and encourage healthy coping skills to deal with issues like stress and peer pressure.

For more information on how to engage in conversations with youth about underage drinking check out the below resources:

SAMHSA: “Talk. They Hear You.” Substance Use Prevention Campaign Resources
<https://www.samhsa.gov/talk-they-hear-you/parent-resources>

MADD: “Power of Parents” Handbooks
<https://madd.org/power-of-parents/>

Partnership to End Addiction: “Alcohol- What Families Need to Know to Help Protect Young People”
https://drugfree.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Alcohol-Guide_Families_030821.pdf

References: American Academy of Pediatrics; National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism; National Institute on Drug Abuse; Partnership to End Addiction; Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration