

UNDERAGE
DRINKING:
MYTH
AND FACT

There are many misconceptions concerning adolescents and alcohol use. These issues confuse not only young people, but their parents and other responsible adults. Following are some common myths and realities about teenage drinking.

Myths & Facts

Myth: All teenagers will drink at some point, no matter how hard we try to stop them.

Fact: Although underage drinking is a serious problem, 81 percent of adolescents ages 12 to 17 have chosen not to drink in the past year.

Myth: My son or daughter knows everything about drinking, so we don't need to talk about it.

Fact: Many teenagers have dangerous misconceptions about alcohol—for example, they don't realize that wine coolers have the same alcohol content as a shot of distilled spirits, or they think they can sober up by drinking coffee or getting fresh air.²

Myth: What parents say or do won't make any difference; teenagers only listen to their friends.

Fact: Parents can be very influential. A study of adolescents and their families conducted by the Research Institute on Addictions revealed that both adolescent girls and adolescent boys whose parents supervise their friendships and activities are less likely to engage in problem behaviors, including drinking, and that this was true regardless of race or income level.³

Myth: He only drinks beer. It's a phase—he'll get over it, just like I did.

Fact: Adolescents who begin drinking before age 15 or younger are four times more likely to develop problems with alcohol use and dependence than those who begin drinking at age 21 or older.⁴ Many engage in binge drinking, which is drinking five or more drinks on one occasion.⁵ Some people mistakenly believe that beer and wine are light in alcohol content; in fact, they have the same alcohol content.

What Is a Drink?

A standard drink is 12 grams of alcohol, which is equal to:

- One 12-ounce bottle of beer
- One 12-ounce wine cooler
- One 5-ounce glass of wine
- 1.5 ounces of 80-proof distilled spirits.⁶

Myth: A person will not do anything when intoxicated that he or she would not do sober.

Fact: Alcohol is a depressant. What alcohol depresses are inhibitions which allow us to do things we would not do if sober. As the inhibitory processes are depressed by alcohol, the effect on the brain can cause a personality change and cloud judgment. As few as two drinks can impair coordination and thinking.⁷

Myth: It's okay for young people to drink, just as long as they don't drive. The worst that can happen is they'll wake up with a terrible hangover.

Fact: Wrong. The worse thing that can happen is that they won't wake up at all. A person can drink enough to kill him or herself in a couple of hours by drinking a large amount of alcohol quickly. When the blood alcohol content reaches a certain concentration, heart rate and respiration can shut down. Drinking also increases the risk of injury from car crashes, falls, burns, drowning, and suicide, as well as the chance that a young person will commit a crime or become a victim of crime.^{8,9}

Myth: She's a big girl. She can handle her liquor.

Fact: Size alone does not determine how alcohol affects females; gender-based physiology plays an important role.



Females become more intoxicated than males after drinking the same amount of alcohol, even when differences in body weight are taken into account. This is because female bodies have proportionately less water than male bodies. Because alcohol mixes with body water, a given amount of alcohol becomes more highly concentrated in a female body than in a male body.¹⁰

Myth: One drink does not affect driving.

Fact: Youthful age has been cited as one of the most important variables related to crash risk. Young drivers are inexperienced not only in driving but in drinking and in combining the two activities. According to one study, each 0.02-percent increase in blood alcohol content (BAC) above 0.00 percent places 16- to 20-year-old drivers at greater risk for a crash than older drivers. Roadside surveys indicate that young people are less likely than adults to drive after drinking; however, especially at low and moderate BAC's, their crash rates are substantially higher than those of other groups.¹¹

Myth: We've been through this before. Treatment does not work with her.

Fact: Treatment can be seen as taking place on a continuum starting with outreach, screening, and assessment to identify youths who are at risk or who already engage in substance use. It continues through the stages of counseling and treatment to continuing care and support to reinforce abstinence. Coercive pressure to seek treatment is generally not conducive to the behavior change process. Treatment providers should be sensitive to motivational barriers to change at the outset of intervention.¹²

Myth: Alcohol is not such a big deal, compared with illicit drugs.

Fact: Alcohol is a factor in the three leading causes of deaths among 14- and 15 year olds: unintentional injuries, homicides, and suicides.¹³

Myth: All college students drink.

Fact: Most college students overestimate the amount of alcohol that is consumed by their peers. Most college students drink moderately, and many don't drink at all. One survey showed that 1 in 5 college students (19 percent) abstained from using alcohol.¹⁴

Myth: I don't have to worry about alcohol on college campuses because my child doesn't drink.

Fact: College men and women who do not drink or drink moderately are tremendously affected by other students who drink heavily. A recent survey showed that about two-thirds of students are affected by binge drinking by other students.¹⁵

Taking Aim at a Popular Myth

A campaign to help youth dispel the myth that "everyone is using drugs" and replace it with the reality that "there are many better things to do than drugs" was launched by the Center for Substance Abuse Prevention in September 1998. Known as the PAC or the Positive Activities Campaign, this effort is aimed at raising awareness that opportunities to participate in positive skill-building activities with caring adults can reduce risky behaviors by young people, including alcohol use. For more information about PAC and other SAMHSA alcohol education and prevention programs, call the National Clearinghouse for Alcohol and Drug Information at 1-800-729-6686.

Sources

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SAMHSA, a public health agency in the Department of Health and Human Services, is the Federal Government's lead agency for improving the quality and availability of substance abuse prevention, addiction treatment, and mental health services in the United States. Further information about SAMHSA is available on the Internet at www.samhsa.gov.