

Adolescents and Alcohol

Young people use alcohol more than any other substance. Some adults view drinking as an innocent, every-kid-tries-it behavior. Some even provide the alcohol. They do not realize that growing bodies are especially vulnerable to the effects of alcohol. Youth are at much greater risk than adults for emotional and physical harm. And because alcohol is cheap and easy for young people to get, it is all the more dangerous.

ALCOHOL IS LINKED TO THE HIGH DEATH RATE AMONG ADOLESCENTS

Of all age groups, only 15- to-24-year-olds have an increasing death rate. The causes include car wrecks, suicides, and homicides, most of which are alcohol-related.

ALCOHOL CAN HARM THOSE STILL DEVELOPING PHYSICALLY

Adolescence is a time of rapid growth. The brain, nervous system, reproductive system, and liver are still maturing. The body and muscle mass are incomplete and much more sensitive to the effects of alcohol.

ALCOHOL CAN HARM THOSE STILL DEVELOPING EMOTIONALLY

Young people are still forming their identities and learning basic social skills. Alcohol produces a chemical “high” that interferes with learning how to deal with others, carry out responsibilities, and handle problems. Problem drinkers often remain immature, even in adulthood.

USING ALCOHOL AT ANY EARLY AGE CAN INCREASE THE RISK FOR DEPENDENCY

Early adolescents and teenagers who begin drinking are more likely to become alcohol dependent—alcoholic—than those who begin drinking at age 21 or later.

ADOLESCENTS USUALLY DRINK TO GET DRUNK

Young people usually drink to get “buzzed” or “wasted.” At teenage parties where alcohol is available, the focus is on drinking, usually with little or no parental supervision. The emphasis is on “chug-a-lug” and other drinking games. In such a setting, most young drinkers get drunk.

ALCOHOL CAN LEAD TO OTHER PROBLEM BEHAVIORS

Any level of alcohol in the body of a young person puts him or her at high risk for other problems such as sexual activity, accidents, and violent behaviors.

In addition, those who sell or furnish alcohol to a minor other than their own child may face serious legal consequences, such as fines and/or imprisonment. They also may be financially liable in a civil suit brought against them by anyone who suffers injury or property loss because of an intoxicated minor.

Note: In some families and cultures, the use of alcohol by minors may be acceptable with parental permission under carefully controlled circumstances, such as ceremonial and religious occasions. Such occasions are an important exception to the general rule.