

Alcohol: Your Child and Drugs



Children are challenged at younger ages than ever before to try drugs. Use of tobacco, marijuana, and cocaine are serious problems. However, one of the most abused drugs in our society is alcohol. Alcohol is a drug because it acts as a depressant on the nervous system and is very addictive. Though it's illegal for people under age 21 to drink, we all know that most teenagers are no strangers to alcohol. Many of them are introduced to alcohol during childhood.

Why parents should worry

- About 1 out of 5 fifth graders have been drunk.
- Four out of 10 sixth graders say there is pressure from other students to drink.
- Nearly 80% of high school seniors report having used alcohol.

Alcohol is often the first drug that young people try. Some parents may breathe a sigh of relief when they find out their teen is "only" drinking alcohol. Since alcohol is legal and found in most American homes, parents may think it isn't dangerous. Not true. Alcohol can be very harmful.

Childhood drinking begins early, often between 11 and 13 years of age, and sometimes even younger. Alcohol is often called a "gateway drug." When young people like the feeling they get from alcohol, they may be interested in trying other drugs later. This can lead to multiple drug use, which is very dangerous. The use of alcohol, by itself or with other drugs, can harm your child's normal growth and development.

Even if a teenager only drinks occasionally, intoxicated behavior can be lethal. Just one drink can impair decision making and slow down reaction time in any situation. Alcohol is linked with a variety of risky behaviors, such as:

- **Crime and serious violence.**
- **Early sexual activity, multiple partners, sexually transmitted diseases including AIDS, and unintended teenage pregnancy.**
- **Fetal Alcohol Syndrome.** Drinking during pregnancy can cause a baby to be born with major birth defects. No one knows exactly how much alcohol is too much during pregnancy, but the more a mother drinks, the greater the risk to her baby.
- **Drunk driving.** It is the leading cause of death for young adults, aged 15 to 24 years. In one study, an estimated 6% to 14% of drivers under 21 years of age who were stopped at roadside checkpoints had been drinking. This age-group makes up only one fifth of the licensed drivers in the United States, yet they are involved in almost half of all fatal car crashes.

Why young people drink

Young people drink alcohol for a variety of reasons.

1. Curiosity. They have heard that getting drunk is fun and they want to find out for themselves.
2. They see drinking as a "rite of passage"—something to be experienced on the way to adulthood.

3. To get drunk. This explains why they often drink until they are out of control. Binge drinking (consuming five or more drinks in a row for males, four for females) is alarmingly common. Sixteen percent of 8th graders, 25% of 10th graders, and 30% of seniors have reported binge drinking.
4. To fit in with friends who are already using alcohol.
5. To feel relaxed and to boost self-confidence.
6. To escape problems, such as depression, family conflict, trouble in school or with a boyfriend or girlfriend.

Stages of alcohol use

The same pattern of use and abuse exists for alcohol as with other drugs such as marijuana or cocaine. Experts have noted the following stages of alcohol use:

Stage 1:

Experimenting with alcohol. There may be strong peer pressure to use alcohol "just for fun" and to be part of the group. Most use happens on weekends. There often is no change in behavior between uses.

Stage 2:

Actively seeking alcohol. Alcohol is used to produce good feelings during times of stress. Usage occurs during the week. Schoolwork may suffer. Changes in behavior may include:

- an increase in time spent alone
- a decline in communication with family members, frequent arguing, and a high level of secretiveness
- changes in dress and grooming
- changes in choice of friends
- repeated or unexplained injuries or fights
- poor sleeping habits and a lack of energy
- irregular eating habits
- bloodshot eyes
- mood changes, including irritability and depression
- running away from home
- attempting suicide

Keep in mind that some of these symptoms occur from time to time in normal, nonalcohol-using teens, and none alone is proof of alcohol or drug use. However, a combination of any of the above symptoms may signal a problem.

Stage 3:

Preoccupation with alcohol. There is an almost total loss of control over the use of alcohol. Attempts to limit alcohol use at this stage can cause withdrawal symptoms of depression, moodiness, and irritability. Alcoholic beverages may disappear from the home. There is a danger of turning to other drugs or stronger forms of liquor. Family possessions may also disappear as the alcohol user seeks money to support his habit. There may be trouble with the law for these same reasons.

The good news

Most adolescents never move beyond the first stage of alcohol use. Whether they do or not depends for the most part on their personality, their family, and their community. For those who do move to the advanced stages, the entire process can take months or years. Many young people and adults receive help too late. This is why early detection is so important.

How to prevent alcohol use and abuse

As with any disease, prevention is the best treatment. Parents must learn the facts about teen alcohol use and abuse to help their children remain alcohol free.

Parents who drink

Parents who choose to use alcohol must be careful how it is used in the home. Having a drink should never be shown as a way to cope with problems. Don't drink in unsafe conditions—driving the car, mowing the lawn, using the stove, etc. Don't encourage your child to drink or to join you in having a drink. Never make jokes about getting drunk; make sure that your children understand that it is neither funny nor acceptable. Show your children that there are many ways to have fun without alcohol. Happy occasions and special events don't have to include drinking.

Parents should set a good example at home by limiting their own use of alcohol and other drugs. Parents who don't drink should be aware that this alone will not guarantee their children and teenagers won't use alcohol. Parents who are alcoholics or problem drinkers place their children at increased risk of alcohol dependence. Studies suggest that alcoholism may run in the family. One out of 5 young adults with an alcoholic parent is likely to become an alcoholic too.

Education about alcohol should begin early. Parents can help their children resist alcohol use in these ways:

- **Give your child a sense of confidence.** This is the best defense against peer pressure. Build your child's self-esteem with praise and avoid frequent criticism.
- **Listen** to what your child says. Pay attention, and be helpful during periods of loneliness or doubt.
- **Know who your child's friends are** and make a point to get to know them.

- **Provide parental supervision.** Don't allow your teen to attend parties where alcohol is being served. Insist that a parent be present at parties to supervise. Contact other parents to arrange alcohol-free social events.
- **Offer a "free call home."** Drinking and driving may lead to death. Make sure your child knows not to ride with a driver who has been drinking. Let him know that he can call home without fear of consequences that night. Discuss the incident the next day.
- **Help your child learn to handle strong emotions and feelings.** Model ways to control stress, pain, or tension.
- **Talk about things that are important issues for your child,** including alcohol, drugs, and the need for peer-group acceptance.
- **Encourage enjoyable and worthwhile outside things to do;** avoid turning leisure time into chores.
- **Join your child in learning all you can about preventing alcohol abuse.** Programs offered in schools, churches, and youth groups can help you both learn more about alcohol abuse.

Your pediatrician understands that good communication between parents and children is one of the best ways to prevent alcohol use. If talking with your teenager about alcohol is difficult, your pediatrician may be able to help open the lines of communication. If you suspect your child is using alcohol or any other drug, ask your pediatrician for advice and help.

The information contained in this publication should not be used as a substitute for the medical care and advice of your pediatrician. There may be variations in treatment that your pediatrician may recommend based on individual facts and circumstances.

From your doctor

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American Academy of Pediatrics
PO Box 747
Elk Grove Village, IL 60009-0747
Web site — <http://www.aap.org>

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