

BINGE DRINKING

content or 1.5 ounces of 80-proof distilled spirits), and for women, no more than one standard drink per day. No one should drink if they are pregnant, nursing or trying to conceive; driving or engaging in activities that require attention, judgment or skill; taking medication that interacts with alcohol; or recovering from alcohol or other drug dependence.

Young people also should share their concerns with friends whom they believe need help controlling their drinking. When a young person is in danger because of drinking, intervene with safety in mind. If someone passes out from drinking too heavily, consider that person at risk for alcohol poisoning and possible death and seek medical help immediately.

Parents and other adults Adults can set a good example by using alcohol in moderation, preferably with meals and never in risky situations, such as before operating a car or boat. Parents also should never permit underage drinking under any circumstances. Research shows that this may lead a young person to believe that s/he can drink without Mom or Dad's permission. Finally, parents should never refer to or model alcohol use as a solution to stress or emotional problems.

Schools and college campuses Schools and college campuses can foster personal responsibility, positive peer influence and no use for underage people or responsible drinking for those of age. They can do so by acknowledging the right of all students to learn in a safe environment and by allocating resources for the prevention of excessive or underage alcohol use. All staff should be trained to identify students who are drinking problematically and to refer those students to appropriate resources for help. Many

schools have Student Assistance Programs (SAPs). All students should have instruction on the physical, legal, social and psychological complications of alcohol and other drug use.

Communities Some communities have drafted stiff penalties against retailers and adults convicted of selling or providing alcohol to minors. Other communities require keg alcohol tagging to aid police in determining sources of alcohol at raided underage drinking parties. Community groups, bound by a concern for public safety, have formed coalitions to draft community-wide approaches to underage or irresponsible alcohol use.

To learn more about the consequences of binge drinking and how to prevent its consequences in your community, contact a local agency that provides prevention services. To find such an agency, look under "Alcohol Information and Treatment Centers" in the yellow pages, or contact your area United Way or United Fund.

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Binge drinking is defined as consuming five or more drinks during a drinking session for men, four or more for women. While a person of any age can binge drink, it's mostly a problem for young people, including minors. In national surveys, about a third of high school seniors and 42% of college students reported at least one occasion of binge drinking within the previous two weeks.

There are several risks associated with binge drinking. It increases the risk for injuries, especially among young people who drink and then drive or engage in other high risk activities. According to the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the four leading injury-related causes of death among those under the age of 20 are motor vehicle crashes, homicides, suicides and drownings. Alcohol is involved in many of these deaths.

Sexual encounters and the risk of pregnancy, as well as date rape and other violence, can and do occur more frequently while students are consuming large amounts of alcohol by binge drinking. These acts can result in serious injury, sexually transmitted diseases and HIV exposure.

Young people who binge drink also are more likely to damage property, have trouble with authorities, miss class and experience injuries than students who don't binge drink.

There's also the risk of alcohol poisoning. In large quantities, alcohol can kill. The Newton, Mass.-based Higher Education Center for Alcohol and Other Drug Prevention estimates there were 38 alcohol related deaths on college campuses in the US in 1997, and other resources give even higher estimates.

Despite the risks, young people don't seem to be getting the message about the harmfulness of binge drinking. While national surveys show a significant decline in the use of other drugs by high school seniors and college-age youths, there have been only modest declines in the number of students who binge drink. Teenagers and young adults drink alcoholic beverages at about the same rates they did five years ago.

But binge drinking is a problem for everyone, not just the binge drinker. As proof, 80% of college students who don't binge drink say they were assaulted, had property vandalized, had their sleep or study-time interrupted, or were the target of an unwanted sexual advance by a student who had been binge drinking.

The facts

- Binge drinking is defined as consuming five or more drinks during a drinking session for men, four or more for women.
- The highest rate of binge drinking occurs among college students who live in fraternity and sorority houses. The second highest rate occurs among college athletes.
- An American Academy of Pediatrics survey found that teenagers who drink at least once a month typically consume nearly three drinks at a time while those who drink on six or more occasions a month average more than five drinks at a time.
- More than a third of high school seniors see no great risk in consuming four to five drinks a day.
- Binge drinking in high school, especially among males, is strongly predictive of binge drinking in college.

Why young people binge drink

There are several theories about why young people binge drink. The first has to do with the availability of alcohol. Youths report that alcohol is easier to get today than it was five years ago, and there is a high correlation between alcohol's availability and its use. In addition, alcoholic beverages remain inexpensive compared to other beverages and other mood-altering substances, especially beer when purchased in kegs, often the centerpiece of a party.

Binge drinking also is traditionally associated with the college experience, a time when young people are exploring their newfound freedoms independent of parental control. This may be the reason why 42% of college students engage in binge drinking compared to 34% of their peers who don't attend college.

It should be noted, however, that universities are aware of student binge drinking and other problems related to alcohol and other drug use and are taking steps to prevent its impact. All campuses have initiatives to provide alcohol education or counseling services for students.

Preventing binge drinking

Binge drinking is a public health issue that affects each of us. Therefore, each of us can do something to prevent it. Here are some examples of what can be done.

Students Young people are a first line of defense in preventing binge drinking. Just as they can influence friends to use alcohol to excess, they can influence friends to not use.

Students of legal drinking age should follow the federal government's guidelines for low-risk alcohol use. For men, the guidelines are no more than two standard drinks per day (a standard drink is either 12 ounces of 3% alcohol-content beer, 5 ounces of 12% alcohol-