



**Q.** I am a high school teacher and I know that many of my students drink alcohol. I've spoken to them about it and they don't seem to be concerned as long as they don't drink and drive. I've even heard them say that their parents know about it. Can you alert teens and parents to the dangers of alcohol?

**A.** Yes, it is amazing that we have so much information about the damage alcohol can cause yet our teens continue to drink it. The teen years are challenging ones because teens think that they are invincible, they have little life experience, and they think that adults are out to ruin their fun. I will provide some information here that you can share creatively with your students and parents to open the discussion. Information gathered from the [www.kidshealth.org](http://www.kidshealth.org) website reveals the following. Just about everyone knows that the legal drinking age throughout the United States is 21. But according to the National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse, almost 80% of high school students have tried alcohol.

## **What Is Alcohol?**

Alcohol is created when grains, fruits, or vegetables are fermented. Fermentation is a process that uses yeast or bacteria to change the sugars in the food into alcohol. Fermentation is used to produce many necessary items — everything from cheese to medications. Alcohol has different forms and can be used as a cleaner, an antiseptic, or a sedative. So if alcohol is a

natural product, why do teens need to be concerned about drinking it? When people drink alcohol, it's absorbed into their bloodstream. From there, it affects the central nervous system (the brain and spinal cord), which controls virtually all body functions. Because experts now know that the human brain is still developing during our teens, scientists are researching the effects drinking alcohol can have on the teen brain. Teens may not want to have their brains, thinking processes, intelligence and other neurological skills damaged before they even enter into colleges and their life careers.

### **How Does It Affect the Body?**

Alcohol is a depressant, which means it slows the function of the central nervous system. Alcohol actually blocks some of the messages trying to get to the brain. This alters a person's perceptions, emotions, movement, vision, and hearing.

In very small amounts, alcohol can help a person feel more relaxed or less anxious. More alcohol causes greater changes in the brain, resulting in intoxication. People who have overused alcohol may stagger, lose their coordination, and slur their speech. They will probably be confused and disoriented. Depending on the person, intoxication can make someone very friendly and talkative or very aggressive and angry. Reaction times are slowed dramatically — which is why people are told not to drink and drive. People who are intoxicated may think they're moving properly when they're not. They may act totally out of character. When large amounts of alcohol are consumed in a short period of time, alcohol poisoning can result. Alcohol poisoning is exactly what it sounds like — the body has become poisoned by large amounts of alcohol. Violent vomiting is usually the first symptom of alcohol poisoning. Extreme sleepiness, unconsciousness, difficulty breathing, dangerously low blood sugar, seizures, and even death may result.

## Why Do Teens Drink?

Experimentation with alcohol during the teen years is common. Some reasons that teens use alcohol and other drugs are:

1. curiosity
2. to feel good, reduce stress, and relax
3. to fit in
4. to feel older

From a very young age, kids see advertising messages showing beautiful people enjoying life — and alcohol. Many parents and other adults use alcohol socially — having beer or wine with dinner, for example — alcohol seems harmless to many teens. Parents who use alcohol when there are stressful situations teach their children that alcohol is good when things are bad.

## **Why Shouldn't They Drink?**

Although it's illegal to buy alcohol in the United States until the age of 21, most teens can get access to it. It's therefore up to you to make a decision about drinking. In addition to the possibility of becoming addicted, there are some downsides to drinking:

The punishment is severe. Teens who drink put themselves at risk for obvious problems with the law (it's illegal; you can get arrested). Teens who drink are also more likely to get into fights and commit crimes than those who don't.

People who drink alcohol regularly often have problems with school. Drinking can damage a student's ability to study well and get decent grades, as well as affect sports performance (the coordination thing).

They can look really stupid. The impression is that drinking is cool, but the nervous system changes that come from drinking alcohol can make people do stupid or embarrassing things, like throwing up or peeing on themselves. Drinking also gives people bad breath, and no one enjoys a hangover.

Alcohol puts your health at risk. Teens who drink are more likely to be sexually active and to have unsafe, unprotected sex. This can result in unwanted pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases can change — or even end — lives. The risk of injuring yourself, maybe even fatally, is higher when you're under the influence, too. One half of all drowning deaths among teen guys are related to alcohol use. Use of alcohol greatly increases the chance that a teen will be involved in a car crash, homicide, or suicide.

Who wants to gain weight? Teen drinkers are more likely to get fat or have health problems, too. One study by the University of Washington found that people who regularly had five or

more drinks in a row starting at age 13 were much more likely to be overweight or have high blood pressure by age 24 than their non drinking peers. People who continue drinking heavily well into adulthood risk damaging their organs, such as the liver, heart, and brain.

## **How Can They Avoid Drinking?**

If all their friends drink and they don't want to, it can be hard to say "no, thanks." No one wants to risk feeling rejected or left out. Different strategies for turning down alcohol work for different people. Some people find it helps to say no without giving an explanation, others think offering their reasons works better ("I'm not into drinking," "I have a game tomorrow," or "my uncle died from drinking," for example).

If saying no to alcohol makes them feel uncomfortable in front of people they know, teach them to blame their parents or another adult for their refusal. Saying, "My parents are coming to pick me up soon," "I already got in major trouble for drinking once, I can't do it again," or "my coach would kill me," can make saying no a bit easier for some.

If they are going to a party and they know there will be alcohol, teach them to plan their strategy in advance. They and their friends can develop a signal for when it's time to leave, for example. They can also make sure that they have plans to do something besides just hanging out in someone's basement drinking beer all night. Plan a trip to the movies, the mall, a concert, or a sports event. They might also organize their friends into a volleyball, bowling, or softball team — any activity that gets them moving.

Girls or guys who have strong self-esteem are less likely to become problem drinkers than people with low self-esteem!

## **What Can Parents Do?**

First the facts! A wide gap exists between parents' perceptions of their teens' drinking habits and those habits reported by teens themselves. The largest gap is between 15-to 16-year olds and their parents. Only 31 percent of parents of teens in this group say that their teen probably or definitely has consumed an alcoholic beverage in the last year, as compared with 60 percent of teens in this age group who report having done this. Parents perceive alcohol ads as having a serious effect on teen drinking habits, and they see alcohol companies as falling far short in dealing responsibly with the impact of their advertising on young people. Fully two-thirds (66 percent) of parents say that seeing and hearing alcohol ads makes teens more likely to drink alcohol than they otherwise would be. Minority parents are substantially more likely than are parents overall to think alcohol ads make teens more likely to drink, with 76 percent of African-American parents and 73 percent of Hispanic parents agreeing that this is the case. Almost three-quarters of parents fault alcohol companies for the amount of ads that teens see and hear.

Girls Targeted More! In 2002, underage youth saw more alcohol advertising than adults in magazines, and underage girls were even more exposed to this advertising than boys, according to a study in the July 2004 issue of The Archives of Pediatrics and Adolescent Medicine, one of the JAMA/Archives journals:

### **Parents Must:**

1. Educate themselves.

Sign up for The Anti-Drug Parenting Tips Newsletter or [www.Freevibe.com](http://www.Freevibe.com). Call 1-800-788-2800; Spanish: 1-877-746-3764 (24 hours, 7 days a week). Or visit their Web site at <http://www.health.org>

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## 2. Have The Talk — Let Them Know You Know

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## 3. Be Specific About Your Concerns

## 4. Don't Make Excuses

## 5. Try to Remain Calm and Connect With Him/Her

Good Luck!

Some information gathered from the **www.about.com** and **www.dontserveteens.gov/dangers.html** websites.

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