

# Underage Drinking



# Underage Drinking:

## A Potentially Serious Concern for You and Your Teen

By Annel Navarro

Alcohol has been found to be the most widely used and abused substance amongst adolescents. It is also a readily accessible substance that is continuously and aggressively promoted by today's society.

The adolescent years are a period of mixed thoughts and emotions. These are sensitive years where teens can be easily influenced, and where they tend to be under heavy influence from peers. The consumption of alcohol during these critical years can lead to alcohol abuse and ultimately alcoholism. According to the Centers for Disease Control, youth who start drinking before the age of 15, are five times more likely to develop alcohol dependence or abuse later in life than those who begin drinking at or after the age of 21.

### Do You Know... What Alcopops Are?

Alcopops are one of the recent trends that have been found to contribute to underage drinking.

Alcopops are sweet, fruity drinks made to taste like soda or punch. Alcopops are marketed to look especially appealing to young teens by using colorful packaging and

designs resembling many teen-friendly drinks. Alcopops have almost the same amount of alcohol as beer, however, with its high sugar, and in some cases caffeine content, Alcopops do a fantastic job of disguising the alcohol flavor. How much alcohol does one beer have? The alcohol content of one beer is on average 5% with some beers being as high as 7%. This means that with one beer, your teen can have a blood alcohol concentration (BAC) of .01%-.04%. In California, it is illegal for an adult to drive with a BAC of .08 or more. So, a level of .01% is not only considered unlawful under the age of 21, but also dangerous and risky for a teen who intends on driving. In fact, someone is injured in an alcohol-related motor vehicle crash every two minutes, and every 31 minutes an alcohol-related crash fatality occurs in the United States.



Alcohol abuse kills more teenagers through drunk driving than all other fatal illnesses combined.

In San Diego County alone, each year, about 2,500 youth find themselves in need of emergency room treatment as a result of alcohol-related injuries. Additionally, there has recently been a shocking trend of fatal car accidents involving San Diego teenagers. From September 2009 to December 2009, nine fatal car accidents involving drivers under the age of 21 have resulted in eleven deaths. It is suspected that in at least five of these accidents, alcohol or drugs were a leading factor.

### The serious consequences of underage drinking are tragic.

According to the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, underage alcohol use is more likely to kill young people than all illegal drugs combined. Furthermore, the rate of fatal crashes among intoxicated drivers between the ages of 16 and 20 is more than twice the rate for alcohol-involved drivers 21 and older.

Alcohol is often a major contributor to the three leading causes of death among teenagers and young adults: car accidents, homicides, and suicides.



Drinking can also lead to other high-risk behaviors and dangers, such as unprotected sex or sexual assault.

## What Can Parents Do?

Underage drinking has become an issue of great concern, and one that you must be aware of in your family. It should not be taken lightly and it is not a part of growing up or a rite of passage. Take a proactive stance. Underage drinking can be prevented.

- Learn about the symptoms and warning signs of substance abuse, the effects of addiction, and how to get help.
- Talk with your teen about alcohol. Remember, it is never too early or too late to start!
- Maintain open, trusting communication and express clear, consistent messages about alcohol.
- Encourage conversation that is two sided. Listen without interruption.

Avoid confronting your teen when you think he or she might be under the influence. It may be very difficult to keep calm and talk.




Parents need to be the most powerful influence on their child's behavior. A recent study shows that children whose parents supervise their child's activities and friendships are less likely to become involved in problem behaviors, including drinking and smoking.

It is important to remember that parents serve as a vital role model and have a crucial part in discouraging their children from beginning to use alcohol. This includes controlling the availability of alcohol in the home. Even if you don't buy alcohol for your teen, be aware that your home may be the primary source for them to get a hold of alcohol. It may also be easily obtained from a sibling, friend or stranger who is 21. It's also very possible for your teen to get a fake ID.

Be fully aware about what your teen does during his or her free time and where it is spent. Are they really going to a movie with a friend or are they heading to a house party where there will be no adult supervision? It is important to know that just about every celebratory

## Health Risk

With the adolescent body developing and changing so rapidly as a result of puberty, it is much easier for alcohol to cause problems. This is why teens that drink heavily face numerous potential health problems. Some of these include:

-  • **Brain** – Alcohol kills brain cells. It impairs the long and short-term memory and can cause changes in brain development that may have life-long effects.
-  • **Liver** – Excess alcohol enters the liver cells and this can lead to diseases such as cirrhosis and cancer.
-  • **Growth** – Drinking alcohol prior to or during puberty may affect the critical hormonal balance necessary for normal development of muscles, bones, and organs.

Alcohol suppresses the central nervous system, which essentially means that alcohol lowers inhibitions, such as coordination, balance, concentration, reflexes, and vision, all of which strongly impair judgment.



occasion, such as the traditional football tailgates, Super Bowl, soccer championships, or a simple barbecue gathering can unintentionally fuel underage drinking.

It is also that time of the year where fun in the sun trips to Rosarito or Ensenada may be planned. That's right, Spring Break! This is a time that for many goes hand in hand with partying and underage drinking. This is also a time that has been excessively promoted by the alcohol and tourism industries, specifically targeting teens and young adults. Spring Break can have a dark side and may result in dangerous or even life threatening circumstances.

As a parent, you have the power to influence your teen's decisions. Guide your teen and enable him or her to make better choices that will lead them to safer, healthier lives. They need to know that it is because you love them that you want to keep them safe and point them in the right direction.

## Help is available.

There are many resources where parents can get information on alcohol problems and drugs abuse to share with their children.

For more information on these services, call the multi-lingual Access and Crisis Line at:

**1-800-477-3339.**

Trained counselors are available to assist 24 hours per day, 7 days per week. or visit:

**[www.sdads.org](http://www.sdads.org)**



## What are the Signs of Teen Drinking?

It may be difficult to know when your teen is using alcohol, but look for these signs:

- **Secrecy** – Do you notice increased secrecy about your teen's belongings, activities or even new friends?
- **Mood swings** – Look for extreme changes. Is your teen upbeat one minute followed by withdrawal or anger and rage the next?
- **New friends** – Is your teen suddenly hanging out with new friends? Who are they? Do you know them?
- **School habits change** – Suddenly getting bad grades? Skipping school?



County of San Diego Health and Human Services Alcohol and Drug Agency funds a variety of free and low-cost services for teens and their families.

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