

## Substance Abuse and Young Adults

Young adults on television often are inaccurately portrayed as merely older adolescents with credit cards and ample time to hang out and have fun. If only life were that simple. Those who have lived through the trials and tribulations of young adulthood can attest to the fact that although this time of life can be rewarding and fun, it is not without stress and risk.

Consider Karen, a newly employed 22-year-old assistant manager who discovered that the pressures of her job quickly led to pressure to go out after work for a glass of wine with co-workers. At first the idea of Friday night happy hour was alluring to Karen because it was a way for her to meet others and to wind down after a tough week in the office. It wasn't long before going to happy hour became a nightly ritual for Karen. Moreover, the glass of Chardonnay she drank to "relax" was no longer as fun as two-for-one vodka tonics at the local pub. Predictably, Karen's life began to change. Her hangovers and late arrivals to work were frequent and even joked about among her co-workers. It wasn't until Karen acquired a sexually transmitted disease after a night of binge drinking, followed by an arrest for driving under the influence that she realized how risky and dangerous her "happy hours" had become.

### Facts about substance abuse and young adults

When young adults face stress and tribulations, it may cause them to drink alcohol heavily or abuse other substances. Here are some facts about young adults (age 18-25) and substance abuse:

- **Heavy drinking and binge drinking**—Binge drinking is defined as drinking five or more drinks on the same occasion (in other words, at the same time or within a couple of hours of each other) on at least one day in the past 30 days. Heavy drinking is defined as consuming five or more drinks on the same occasion on five or more days in the past 30 days. Data from 2003 show that the rate of binge drinking was 41.6 percent for young adults age 18 to 25, and heavy drinking was reported by 15.1 percent of persons age 18 to 25. Twenty-nine percent of 21- to 25-year-olds reported driving under the influence of alcohol, which correlates with the high mortality rate due to car crashes for this age group.
- **Drug use**—Compared to adults age 26 and older, young adults are four times more likely to report having used an illegal drug in the past 30 days. Specifically, 20.3 percent of young adults have used an illegal drug in the past 30 days. Marijuana is the most abused drug by all age groups. Seventeen percent of young adults reported that they have used marijuana in the past 30 days compared with only 3 percent of older adults. Beyond age 25, the rates for drug and alcohol abuse decline in proportion with age.
- **Sexually transmitted disease (STDs)**—Acquiring a STD, including HIV, is highly correlated with substance abuse, particularly between binge-drinking and

drug-using young adults. This is due, in part, to the fact that young adults are more frequently intoxicated and impaired and that they are more likely to have unprotected sex with multiple sexual partners.

### Additional factors

Many factors can contribute to the risk of abusing alcohol or drugs, such as:

- **Educational level**—The rate of past month alcohol use increases with increasing levels of education. Among adults age 18 or older with less than a high school education, 37.8 percent were current drinkers in 2002, while 67.4 percent of college graduates were current drinkers. Conversely, binge drinking and heavy drinking were least prevalent (6.7 percent) among college graduates compared to more than 10 percent for those with a high school education or less.
- **Employment status**—The prevalence of substance abuse among young adults also varies with employment status. In 2003, 17 percent of unemployed young adults were classified as substance abusers compared to only 10 percent of those who were gainfully employed.

Young adulthood can be a time of growth and tremendous opportunity. If substance abuse is causing distress or disruption in your life, you can talk confidentially with your employee assistance program (EAP) or a mental health professional.

Sources: Office of National Drug Control Policy, *Pulse Check, National Trends in Drug Abuse*. Executive Office of the President, Spring 1999; Results from the 2002 National Survey on Drug Use and Health: National Finding. Department of Health and Human Services Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, Office of Applied Studies; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, *Monthly Vital Statistics Report, Advance Report of Final Mortality Statistics, 1994, 45(3): Supplement*. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Sept. 30, 1996.

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