

The Dangers of Binge Drinking

Alcohol is the No. 1 drug of choice for Americans, including young adults. It is consumed more frequently than all other drugs *combined* and it is the drug most likely to be associated with injury, illness and death. Alcohol affects judgment, coordination and health. It is involved in half of all automobile fatalities, homicides and suicides—the three leading causes of death in young adults.

Definition of binge drinking

About 10.5 million Americans between the ages of 13-25 drink alcohol. Of these, nearly 7 million are binge drinkers. Binge drinking is defined as consuming five or more drinks on a single occasion.

Binge drinking is highest among 18- to 25-year-olds. The National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA) reports that 80 percent of college students have abused alcohol and more than half of that group has engaged in binge drinking.

Men are more likely to be binge drinkers, though research shows that women are at higher risk for alcohol-related problems at lower levels of consumption. Researchers estimate that alcohol use is implicated in two-thirds of sexual assaults and “date” rapes.

The cost of alcohol abuse by young adults—including traffic accidents, absenteeism, crime, injuries, suicide attempts, alcohol poisoning and treatment—is \$58 billion annually.

Attitudes, perceptions and social influences all impact the problem of binge drinking. Young adults—and many adults—think of drinking as a “rite of passage” and nothing to be concerned about if they don’t get behind the wheel of a car.

Alcohol poisoning

Consuming alcohol rapidly in large quantities can be fatal. Knowing the facts can save lives.

Alcohol is a dangerous central nervous system depressant, regardless of the type of alcoholic beverage. One study found that 80 percent of respondents do not realize that a 12-oz. beer has the same amount of alcohol as a 4-oz. glass of wine or a 1½ -oz. shot of whiskey. In general, if you drink, consume *no more* than one drink per hour—and never on an empty stomach. Factors such as body size, health, medications and other drug usage should be considered for “safe” drinking.

After someone drinks a couple of alcoholic beverages, short-term gratification occurs. The mood-altering effect of alcohol produces pleasure initially. However, after consuming five or more drinks over a short period of time (more than one drink per hour), short-term gratification is replaced by negative impact on the mind and body in

the form of acute intoxication. Mental and physical functions are disrupted until the person loses consciousness. The signs of acute alcohol poisoning include:

- inability to awaken the intoxicated person
- irregular and slow breathing (less than 12 breaths per minute)
- cold, clammy, bluish skin
- choking on vomit

If you are with a person exhibiting any of these signs, call 911 to get immediate medical help. Alcohol poisoning is a medical emergency that can be fatal.

Talk about the dangers of alcohol

Young adults whose parents, friends and role models talk to them regularly about the dangers of alcohol are 40 percent less likely to drink than their counterparts, yet only one in four persons report having these conversations. Peer pressure is almost universally cited as one of the main reasons young adults say they drink—and drink to excess.

More action is needed to combat the problem of binge drinking. Increasingly, business and academic leaders are instituting (and enforcing) alcohol policies and awareness and treatment programs. Through education, awareness and support, the trend of binge drinking among young people can be reversed.

If you or someone you care about has a drinking problem, contact your employee assistance program (EAP) or another health professional for confidential help.

Resources

Alcoholics Anonymous
www.alcoholics-anonymous.org

American Council on Alcoholism
www.aca-usa.org

National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence
www.ncadd.org

By Karen S. Dickason
© 2005 Achieve Solutions