

# ALCOHOL: A MESSAGE FOR PARENTS

Some parents breathe a sigh of relief when they find out their teenager is "only" drinking alcohol. "At least he's not taking drugs," they often say. "Beer isn't *that* bad..."



Not true - alcohol can be a harmful substance. Still more parents think it's the "lesser of two evils" because it's legal, and they may be more accepting of its use. Lax attitudes have led to a continuing increase in alcohol use by teen-agers, and today it is the most commonly used mind-altering substance among young people.

Adolescent drinking often begins between the ages of 11 and 13. Considering that alcohol is in many, if not most, U.S. homes, this is not surprising. However, no matter when or where alcohol use begins, almost all teen-agers have tried it at least once, and many drink just to get drunk. One study examines just high school seniors and found that 30% of the girls and nearly half of the boys had become "problem drinkers." It wasn't unusual for a teen to drink a six-pack of beer or a bottle of wine every day. And while some adults consider beer less of a problem than hard liquor, the truth is: one can of beer contains the same amount of alcohol as a 1.5-ounce shot of whiskey!

Alcohol depresses the nervous system. It appeals to people of all ages because a drink or two can relax them, often making them feel more comfortable and confident around others. Research shows that drinking also is associated with early sexual intercourse, unintended pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases. Once pregnant, a girl who continues to drink, not knowing that she is pregnant, exposes her baby to greater risk of birth defects.

Alcohol use can affect judgment, lead to risky and even violent behavior, and slow down reaction time. The leading cause of death of U.S. young people ages 15 to 24, is alcohol-related car crashes. According to one estimate, 15% of high school seniors drive while intoxicated. It's no surprise that more than 7,000 teen-agers and young adults die in alcohol-related car crashes, and another 40,000 are injured.

Other problems can be caused by mixing drugs. Drinking alcohol and smoking marijuana at the same time, for example, further distorts the senses and makes coordination problems even worse. Whether used alone or in combination with other drugs, alcohol can interfere with normal development and growth of young teen-agers. It can cause permanent physical and psychological damage through injury, poor school performance, depression, etc. Suicide and homicide - the second and third leading causes of teenage death - are strongly associated with alcohol use.

So, before you go easy on teen-agers drinking alcohol, don't lose sight of how harmful it can be. If your adolescent is drinking or has become a problem drinker, he/she may need professional help. Talk to your pediatrician.

*~ Adapted from Caring for Your Adolescent: ages 12 to 21, American Academy of Pediatrics; Bantam, 1991*