
Alcohol

Getting the Right Message

"Hey, who wants a drink?"

"Oh, come on, just one drink won't hurt you. It's fun."

"It's cool. Everybody drinks, right?"

Wrong.

Drinking alcohol is dangerous for kids and teens and sometimes for adults, too. Alcohol is a drug, and it is the drug most abused by teens. Many kids have their first drink at an early age, as young as 10 or 11 or even younger.

It's easy for kids to get the wrong message about alcohol. They might see their parents drink or watch TV commercials that make drinking look like a lot of fun. You might see people drinking and watching sports together or having a big party.

But alcohol is actually a depressant. That means it's a drug that slows down or depresses the brain. Like many drugs, alcohol changes a person's ability to think, speak, and see things as they really are. A person might lose his or her balance and have trouble walking properly. The person might feel relaxed and happy and later start crying or get in an argument.

What Happens When People Drink?

When people drink too much, they might do or say things they don't mean. They might hurt themselves or other people, especially if they drive a car. Someone who drinks too much also might throw up and could wake up the next day feeling awful — that's called a hangover.

Drinking too much alcohol can lead to alcohol poisoning, which can kill a person. Over time, people who abuse alcohol can do serious damage to their bodies. The liver, which removes poisons from the blood, is especially at risk.

Because alcohol can cause such problems, the citizens and government leaders in the United States decided that kids shouldn't be allowed to buy or use alcohol. By setting the drinking age at 21, they hope older people will be able to make good decisions about alcohol. For instance, they don't want people to drink alcohol and drive cars because that's how many accidents occur.

What Is Alcoholism?

What can be confusing about alcohol is that some grown-ups seem to be able to enjoy it occasionally with no problems. Other people, though, can develop a problem with it. Sometimes, that's called alcoholism (say: al-kuh-HOL-ism) or being an alcoholic (say: al-kuh-HOL-ik). Someone who has alcoholism craves alcohol. The

person has little control over his or her drinking and can't stop without help. A person who starts drinking alcohol at a young age is more likely to develop alcoholism.

Alcoholism is chronic, which means it continues over time. It often gets worse, too, because the person may start experiencing health problems related to drinking. In addition to causing liver problems, long-term drinking can damage the pancreas, heart, and brain.

Say No

It can be tempting to try alcohol. It's normal to be curious about new things, especially if it seems like everyone is doing it. But everyone is **not** drinking alcohol. Don't believe it if someone says you're immature for not drinking. You're actually more mature (which means grown up) because you're being strong and smart.

Still, it can be hard if you feel unpopular because of your decision. Good friends won't stop being your friend just because you don't want to drink alcohol. If you feel this kind of pressure, talk to someone you trust.

And if you're concerned about a friend who's drinking, you should tell one of your parents, a school counselor, or another trusted adult. That way, someone can talk with your friend before the alcohol causes a big problem. Unfortunately, some kids who drink may also drop out of school, get in car accidents, start fights, or join in crimes.

But with help, anyone who has a problem with alcohol can be successful at stopping. And if you're still a kid, help yourself by not starting in the first place!

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