

Alcohol Use: What Parents Need to Know

Alcohol is often the first drug some children and teens try. Alcohol use in children can have harmful short-term and lifelong effects on their health and well-being. Here is information from the American Academy of Pediatrics about alcohol use in children, including risks and how to prevent marijuana use. (Parents include caregivers, and *child* refers to a child or teen, in this publication.)

Talk about the risks of alcohol use

The earlier children begin using alcohol, the more likely they will have problems with it later in life. Because 21 years is the legal drinking age in the United States, children may be more easily exposed to alcohol, like beer stored in the refrigerator, at home or at home parties.

Start talking with your child at an early age about the dangers of alcohol use. Encourage them to ask questions and tell you about their concerns. Remember to listen, and do not lecture or do all the talking. You may find teachable moments from news stories or even TV shows or movies that portray alcohol use in their storylines.

- **Affects growth and development.** Children's brains and bodies keep growing and developing from infancy to young adulthood. Alcohol use can stunt children's brain growth and cause liver damage and hormone imbalances.
- **Leads to school problems.** Alcohol can affect thinking, concentration, and memory. This can lead to school problems, like poor grades and loss of interest in school; some kids may end up dropping out of school.
- **Impairs judgement.** Just one drink can impair decision-making and slow down reaction time. Among 15- to 20-year-olds, nearly a third of all fatal automobile crashes involve alcohol.
- **Is linked to sexual consequences.** Teens who use alcohol are more likely to not use birth control and condoms or to have sex with different people. This can lead to unintended pregnancy, sexually transmitted infections, or sexual assault.

Be aware of the signs of alcohol use

Knowing the signs of alcohol use is the first step in getting help for your child. Signs of alcohol use may include

- Alcohol smell on your child's breath or clothing
- Alcohol in your child's room or backpack
- Appears intoxicated (slurred speech or can't walk straight)
- Spends less time with family and friends and more time alone or away from home
- Often seems moody or irritable
- School problems
- Loss of interest in activities
- Changes in dress and grooming
- Changes in eating and sleeping patterns
- Does illegal things, like stealing
- Talks about depression or suicide or makes suicide attempts

Remember, you are a role model

Be a positive role model in the ways you express, control, and relieve stress, pain, or tension. Actions speak louder than words! Teach children healthy values that are important to your family and that they can use when deciding what is right and wrong.

Parents who drink should be careful how alcohol is used at home. Having a drink should never be shown as a way to cope with problems. Don't drink in unsafe conditions—before or while driving a car, mowing the lawn, or boating. Don't encourage your child to drink or join you in having a drink. Parents who use alcohol often and in large amounts place their children at increased risk for alcohol addiction. Studies show that alcohol use disorder (formerly known as alcoholism) runs in families, so children of parents with alcohol use disorder are more likely to have alcohol use disorder.

Help build resilience

Help your child cope with emotions. Children might consider using alcohol to help them cope with depression or anxiety. Explain that everyone has these feelings at times, so it is important for each person to learn how to express their feelings, cope with them, and face stressors in healthy ways that can help prevent or resolve problems.

Get support

Your child's doctor understands that good communication between parents and children is one of the best ways to prevent alcohol use. If talking with your child about alcohol is difficult, your child's doctor may be able to help open the lines of communication. If you suspect your child is using alcohol or any other drug, ask your child's doctor for advice and help.

About Teen Confidentiality

All teens should be screened for alcohol and other drug use as part of routine medical care. Your child's doctor will want to ask questions about alcohol in private to get honest answers. If your child reports alcohol use, the doctor will determine whether your child needs very brief advice, a return visit, or a referral to a specialist. Every doctor will have their own policy about what information must be shared with a parent and what will stay confidential (between the patient and their doctor), but most doctors will protect a teen's confidentiality if they believe the teen's drug use is not an immediate safety risk to the teen or others. It is important for you to respect the doctor's decisions about confidentiality to encourage your child to have an open and honest discussion with the doctor.

Visit www.HealthyChildren.org for more information.

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The information contained in this publication should not be used as a substitute for the medical care and advice of your pediatrician. There may be variations in treatment that your pediatrician may recommend based on individual facts and circumstances.

