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Alcohol

Getting the Facts

Just about everyone knows that the legal drinking age throughout the United States is 21. But according to the National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse, almost 80% of high school students have tried alcohol.

Deciding whether to drink is a personal decision that we each eventually have to make. This article provides some information on alcohol, including how it affects your body, so you can make an educated choice.

What Is Alcohol?

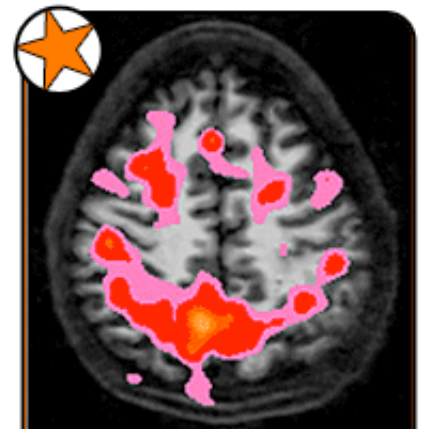
Alcohol is created when grains, fruits, or vegetables are **fermented**. Fermentation is a process that uses yeast or bacteria to change the sugars in the food into alcohol. Fermentation is used to produce many necessary items — everything from cheese to medications. Alcohol has different forms and can be used as a cleaner, an antiseptic, or a sedative.

So if alcohol is a natural product, why do teens need to be concerned about drinking it? When people drink alcohol, it's absorbed into their bloodstream. From there, it affects the central nervous system (the brain and spinal cord), which controls virtually all body functions. Because experts now know that the human brain is still developing during our teens, scientists are researching the effects drinking alcohol can have on the teen brain.

How Does It Affect the Body?

Alcohol is a **depressant**, which means it slows the function of the central nervous system. Alcohol actually blocks some of the messages trying to get to the brain. This alters a person's perceptions, emotions, movement, vision, and hearing.

In very small amounts, alcohol can help a person feel more relaxed or less anxious. More alcohol causes greater changes in the brain, resulting in **intoxication**. People who have overused alcohol may stagger, lose their coordination, and slur their speech. They will probably be confused and disoriented. Depending on the person,



intoxication can make someone very friendly and talkative or very aggressive and angry. Reaction times are slowed dramatically — which is why people are told not to drink and drive. People who are intoxicated may think they're moving properly when they're not. They may act totally out of character.

When large amounts of alcohol are consumed in a short period of time, **alcohol poisoning** can result. Alcohol poisoning is exactly what it sounds like — the body has become poisoned by large amounts of alcohol. Violent vomiting is usually the first symptom of alcohol poisoning. Extreme sleepiness, unconsciousness, difficulty breathing, dangerously low blood sugar, seizures, and even death may result.

Why Do Teens Drink?

Experimentation with alcohol during the teen years is common. Some reasons that teens use alcohol and other drugs are:

- curiosity
- to feel good, reduce stress, and relax
- to fit in
- to feel older

From a very young age, kids see advertising messages showing beautiful people enjoying life — and alcohol. And because many parents and other adults use alcohol socially — having beer or wine with dinner, for example — alcohol seems harmless to many teens.

Why Shouldn't I Drink?

Although it's illegal to buy alcohol in the United States until the age of 21, most teens can get access to it. It's therefore up to you to make a decision about drinking. In addition to the possibility of becoming addicted, there are some downsides to drinking:

The punishment is severe. Teens who drink put themselves at risk for obvious problems with the law (it's illegal; you can get arrested). Teens who drink are also more likely to get into fights and commit crimes than those who don't.

People who drink regularly also often have problems with school. Drinking can damage a student's ability to study well and get decent grades, as well as affect sports performance (the coordination thing).

You can look really stupid. The impression is that drinking is cool, but the nervous system changes that come from drinking alcohol can make people do stupid or embarrassing things, like throwing up or peeing on themselves. Drinking also gives people bad breath, and no one enjoys a hangover.



Image courtesy of Susan Tapert, University of California

Alcohol puts your health at risk. Teens who drink are more likely to be sexually active and to have unsafe, unprotected sex. Resulting pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases can change — or even end — lives. The risk of injuring yourself, maybe even fatally, is higher when you're under the influence, too. One half of all drowning deaths among teen guys are related to alcohol use. Use of alcohol greatly increases the chance that a teen will be involved in a car crash, homicide, or suicide.

Teen drinkers are more likely to get fat or have health problems, too. One study by the University of Washington found that people who regularly had five or more drinks in a row starting at age 13 were much more likely to be overweight or have high blood pressure by age 24 than their nondrinking peers. People who continue drinking heavily well into adulthood risk damaging their organs, such as the liver, heart, and brain.

How Can I Avoid Drinking?

If all your friends drink and you don't want to, it can be hard to say "no, thanks." No one wants to risk feeling rejected or left out. Different strategies for turning down alcohol work for different people. Some people find it helps to say no without giving an explanation, others think offering their reasons works better ("I'm not into drinking," "I have a game tomorrow," or "my uncle died from drinking," for example).

If saying no to alcohol makes you feel uncomfortable in front of people you know, blame your parents or another adult for your refusal. Saying, "My parents are coming to pick me up soon," "I already got in major trouble for drinking once, I can't do it again," or "my coach would kill me," can make saying no a bit easier for some.

If you're going to a party and you know there will be alcohol, plan your strategy in advance. You and a friend can develop a signal for when it's time to leave, for example. You can also make sure that you have plans to do something besides just hanging out in someone's basement drinking beer all night. Plan a trip to the movies, the mall, a concert, or a sports event. You might also organize your friends into a volleyball, bowling, or softball team — any activity that gets you moving.

Girls or guys who have strong self-esteem are less likely to become problem drinkers than people with low self-esteem.

Where Can I Get Help?

If you think you have a drinking problem, get help as soon as possible. The best approach is to talk to an adult you trust. If you can't approach your parents, talk to your doctor, school counselor, clergy member, aunt, or uncle. It can be hard for some people to talk to adults about these issues, but a supportive person in a position to help can refer students to a drug and alcohol counselor for evaluation and treatment.

In some states, this treatment is completely confidential. After assessing a teen's problem, a counselor may recommend a brief stay in rehab or outpatient treatment. These treatment centers help a person

gradually overcome the physical and psychological dependence on alcohol.

What If I'm Concerned About Someone Else's Drinking?

Sometimes people live in homes where a parent or other family member drinks too much. This may make you angry, scared, and depressed. Many people can't control their drinking without help. This doesn't mean that they love or care about you any less. Alcoholism is an illness that needs to be treated just like other illnesses.

People with drinking problems can't stop drinking until they are ready to admit they have a problem and get help. This can leave family members and loved ones feeling helpless. The good news is there are many places to turn for help: a supportive adult, such as your guidance counselor, or a relative or older sibling will understand what you're going through. Also, professional organizations like Alateen can help.

If you have a friend whose drinking concerns you, make sure he or she stays safe. Don't let your friend drink and drive, for example. If you can, try to keep friends who have been drinking from doing anything dangerous, such as trying to walk home at night alone or starting a fight. And protect yourself, too. Don't get in a car with someone who's been drinking, even if that person is your ride home. Ask a sober adult to drive you instead or call a cab.

Everyone makes decisions about whether to drink and how much — even adults. It's possible to enjoy a party or other event just as much, if not more so, when you don't drink. And with your central nervous system working as it's supposed to, you'll remember more about the great time you had!

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