

RIA Reaching Others: The Facts on Teen Drinking



Today, Eddy stole a beer from his father’s refrigerator and drank it in his room. Sophie went to her friend’s house for a sleepover, waited with her friend until everyone was asleep, and raided the liquor cabinet. Tommy’s older brother bought him and his friend a six-pack of “hard lemonade,” and they drank it in his garage. What do Eddy, Sophie and Tommy have in common with 4,747 other youth? They each had their first full alcoholic drink today. Every day in the United States, nearly 5,000 youth under the age of 16 have their first full drink of alcohol.

Underage drinking—when an individual below the age of 21 consumes alcohol—continues to be a problem in the U.S. and could have lasting repercussions. Studies show that teens who start drinking before the age of 15 are five times more likely to develop alcohol problems in their lifetime than are those individuals who start drinking at the age of 21 or older.

Why do teens drink?

There are many reasons—here are some of the most common:

- ▶ **Misperception** – Young people generally believe that more people their age are drinking alcohol than is actually happening. They also believe that those who drink are drinking more heavily than they actually are. As seen in the sidebar, one-half of all 15-year-old teens have consumed alcohol; that also means that one-half of all 15-year-olds *have not* consumed alcohol.
- ▶ **Escape** – Some drink to escape their problems, including problems with peers, problems with parents, or problems with school.
- ▶ **Risk-taking** – Some drink because they like to take risks. Many teens drink because they like to feel the rush that comes from doing something they are not supposed to be doing.
- ▶ **Curiosity** – Some drink out of curiosity. They want to know what it feels like to drink, so they drink to gain firsthand knowledge.
- ▶ **Feeling grown-up** – Some think drinking will help them feel grown-up. After all, many adults, including the teen’s parents, drink, so they are just copying the behavior of those grown-ups.
- ▶ **Peer pressure** – Some drink because they see their friends drinking and feel they have to in order to “fit in.” Or they think “all the cool kids drink.” What are the consequences?



Recent statistics

The University of Michigan conducts a yearly survey, “[Monitoring the Future](#),” that measures drug, alcohol and tobacco use among students in 8th, 10th and 12th grade.

The numbers from 2014 show a few encouraging signs:

- ▶ In 2014, 41 percent of all teens reported drinking in the past year, down from 43 percent in 2013.
- ▶ Nine percent of 8th graders, 24 percent of 10th graders, and 37 percent of 12th graders reported drinking alcohol over the previous month.
- ▶ This is a significant drop from 2009, when 15 percent of 8th graders, 30 percent of 10th graders, and 44 percent of 12th graders reported drinking over the previous month.
- ▶ In fact, teen alcohol use in 2014 is at its lowest point since the study began in 1975.
- ▶ Use peaked in 1997, when 61 percent of teens reported drinking in the past 12 months.

However, other studies offer troubling statistics that show education and intervention is still needed:

- ▶ The average age that boys have their first drink of alcohol is 11; for girls, the average age is 13.
- ▶ 37 percent of youth have had a drink by the 8th grade, and 72 percent have consumed alcohol by their high school graduation.
- ▶ At the age of 15 (generally equivalent to 9th/10th grade), 50 percent of teens have consumed at least one drink.

Teen drinking poses a wide variety of risks, including:

- ▶ **Impaired judgment** — Teens who drink make poor decisions, such as drinking and driving, using violence, and sexual activity.
- ▶ **Increased risk of assault** — Youth who drink are more likely to be victims or perpetrators of physical or sexual assault.
- ▶ **Impact on brain development** — The human brain continues to develop up to about the age of 25. Underage drinking can hurt the developing brain, creating problems in how it works.
- ▶ **Injury** — In 2008, more than 190,000 youth went to a hospital emergency room for alcohol-related injuries—an average of 520 ER visits per day.
- ▶ **Death** — Between 4,000 and 5,000 underage drinkers die each year from alcohol-related car crashes, homicides, suicides, alcohol poisoning and accidents (e.g., falls, drownings, etc).

Clues that a teen may be drinking:

- ▶ Sharp drop in grades
- ▶ Sudden increase in behavioral problems
- ▶ Increased secretiveness
- ▶ New group of friends
- ▶ Less interest in appearance or family activities
- ▶ Memory and/or concentration problems

What can parents do?

- ▶ **Talk with teens** – Begin having conversations about alcohol use with children when they are young. Be consistent regarding what you communicate. Research shows that children whose parents are actively involved in their lives are less likely to drink alcohol.
- ▶ **Be a good role model** – If parents drink alcohol responsibly, they are showing their children that alcohol use need not be dangerous. Responsible alcohol use includes not driving following drinking, not drinking in excess, and not drinking to escape or otherwise deal with stress.
- ▶ **Social Norm Education** – Recognize that drinking is less common than most teens believe. If a group of 15-year-olds were asked how many high school sophomores drank alcohol, they would probably guess that 80 to 90 percent of their classmates drink. Educate in home and in schools that not everyone drinks.

Sources/Helpful Resources:

[National Institutes of Health Underage Drinking Fact Sheet](#)

[Center for Disease Control Fact Sheet](#)

[Talking to Kids About Alcohol](#)

[Why Your Child Might Start Drinking](#)

[Get Help for Your Teen](#)



The dangers of binge drinking

Teens drink less frequently than adults, but when they do drink, they are more likely to drink heavily. The average amount of alcohol consumed by a teen per drinking occasion is five drinks, which falls under the category of binge drinking—defined as consuming five or more drinks in a single occasion.

Most recent estimates show that 5 percent of 8th graders, 14 percent of 10th graders, and 22 percent of 12th graders participated in binge drinking over the previous two weeks. In fact, about 90 percent of the alcohol consumed by youth under the age of 21 in the United States is in the form of binge drinking.

Although the rates of binge drinking are generally at their lowest levels in many years for 8th and 10th graders, it is still all too common. About one in five high school seniors report binge drinking at least once in the prior two weeks.

Even more troubling is the trend of “extreme binge drinking.” Some 12th-graders report having 10 or more, or even 15 or more, drinks in a row on at least one occasion in the prior two weeks. Drinking at such high levels can lead to serious consequences, including blackouts, alcohol poisoning, liver disease, neurological disorders and even death.