

Underage Drinking: MYTH vs. REALITY

MYTH: “At least alcohol is safer than other drugs.”

REALITY: Alcohol kills more youth than all other drugs combined.

MYTH: “It’s okay as long as they don’t drive.”

REALITY: Only one-third of underage drinking deaths involve auto crashes—so taking away the car keys doesn’t make underage drinking safe. The remaining two-thirds of youth alcohol related deaths involve alcohol poisoning, homicides, suicides, and unintentional injuries such as burns, drowning, and falls.

Myth: “Changing the drinking age back to 18 would reduce problems with underage drinking.”

REALITY: The minimum legal drinking age was raised to 21 in 1984, and researchers credit the change for saving an estimated 20,000 lives.



Red and pink areas indicate brain activity. Compared with a non-drinker, a 15-year-old heavy drinker showed poor brain activity during a memory task.

Myth: “If we just educate kids about the dangers, they won’t drink.”

REALITY: Research shows that using scare tactics can actually do more harm than good. That’s because we all have a tendency to think, “That won’t happen to me.” Scare tactics can also normalize or glamorize risky behavior.

Myth: “If we just give kids more to do, they won’t drink.”

REALITY: Positive community involvement is a strong protective factor against substance abuse, but this does not necessarily mean “having more to do.” Data shows that kids in urban areas drink just as much as kids in rural areas. And even in the most remote and isolated communities, there are many kids who don’t drink at all.



Myth: “In Europe, youth drink more responsibly than in the U.S.”

REALITY: European kids actually drink more often, drink more heavily, and get drunk more often than American teens.

Myth: “It’s better for kids to start drinking young, so they learn how to handle it.”

REALITY: The adolescent brain is still developing—especially the part of the brain that deals with decision-making. This places kids at a higher risk for academic failure, depression, suicide, sexual assault, teen pregnancy, sexually transmitted infection, and other substance abuse. Younger drinkers are also more likely to develop alcohol dependence.

Myth: “Kids are going to drink anyway—it’s a rite of passage.”

REALITY: Actually, most kids don’t drink. In Maine, anonymous student surveys show that the majority of teens—including 60% of 10th graders and 51% of 12th graders—have not consumed alcohol during the past 30 days. Misperceptions that “everybody’s doing it” actually make young people more likely to drink. On the other hand, when these misperceptions are corrected, and kids realize that “NOT everybody’s doing it,” they are less likely to drink alcohol.



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