

The Risks of Adolescent Alcohol Use by Steve Danzig, LMSW-CC, LADC, CCS

According to the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, early alcohol use may have long-lasting consequences. People who begin drinking before age 15 are four times more likely to develop alcohol dependence at some time in their lives compared with those who have their first drink at age 20 or older. And some of the most immediate, serious, and widespread alcohol-related problems among adolescents are as follows:

Drinking and Driving. Motor vehicle crashes are the leading cause of death among youth ages 15 to 20. Adolescents are already at increased risk through their relative lack of driving experience and drivers younger than 21 are more susceptible than older drivers to the alcohol-induced impairment of driving skills. The rate of fatal crashes among alcohol-involved drivers between 16 and 20 years old is more than twice the rate for alcohol-involved drivers 21 and older.

Suicide. Alcohol use interacts with conditions such as depression and stress to contribute to suicide, the third leading cause of death among people between the ages of 14 and 25. In a 2002 study, 37% of eighth grade females who drank heavily reported attempting suicide, compared with 11% who did not drink.

Sexual assault. Sexual assault, including date rape, occurs most commonly among women in late adolescence and early adulthood. Research performed in 2002, suggests that alcohol use by the offender, the victim, or both, increases the likelihood of sexual assault by a male acquaintance.

Both the immediate and long-term risks associated with adolescent alcohol use underscore the need for effective prevention and treatment if the use has already begun.

The best method of preventing teen alcohol use and subsequent abuse begins at home. Family factors, such as parent-child relationships, discipline methods, communication, monitoring and supervision, and parental involvement, exert a significant influence on youthful alcohol use.

If you suspect that your teen is using alcohol, immediately schedule an assessment with a licensed alcohol and drug counselor (“LADC”) or other qualified alcohol and substance abuse provider that specializes in adolescent treatment. Identifying alcohol use disorders in youth requires different screening, assessment, and treatment approaches than those used for adults. If the assessment indicates that there is a problem, your alcohol and drug counselor can recommend the best course of treatment.

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