

Background Information about Teen Alcohol Use

Lesson Title: Alcohol's Effect on the Mind and Body

Page 1 of 2

Teacher Sheet



Alcohol consumption is widespread among preteens and teens. According to one national survey, one in four eighth graders reports drinking alcohol within the past month and 18% of eighth graders have gotten drunk at least once in the past year (*Make a Difference: Talk to Your Child about Alcohol*, Rockville, MD, National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, 2000 <<http://www.alcoholfreechildren.org/en/pubs/pdf/makeadifference.pdf>>).

A recent survey from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Service's National Household Survey on Drug Use and Health reported that about 28% of young people between the ages of 12 and 20 said that they had had a drink in the last month, more than 18% of young people in that age group said that they were binge drinkers (meaning that they had five or more drinks in one sitting), and 6% said that they were heavy drinkers ("Who's Using Alcohol." Family Guide, Keeping Youth Mentally Healthy & Drug Free. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. 2007 <<http://family.samhsa.gov/talk/alcohol.aspx>>).

While many people may think that drinking is less serious than drug use, that is not the case. Alcohol is a depressant, which means that it slows body functions, including heartbeat, breathing, and thinking. Drinking alcoholic beverages can have other effects on the body, such as those listed below ("Alcohol and the Brain." Neuroscience for Kids. Eric H. Chudler. 1996-2007 <<http://faculty.washington.edu/chudler/alco.html>>; The Cool Spot, <<http://www.thecoolspot.gov/index.asp>>).

Short-Term Effects of Drinking in Moderation

- Stress and tension reduction
- Mood enhancement
- Increased relaxation
- Reduction of social anxiety
- Increased pleasure
- Improved social cohesion

Short-Term Effects of Drinking Too Much

- Slurred Speech
- Drowsiness
- Confusion
- Poor coordination
- Dizziness
- Vomiting
- Blurred vision

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Page 2 of 2

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Long-Term Effects of Drinking in Moderation

- Longer life
- Reduced risk of heart disease and heart attack
- Increased ability to survive a heart attack
- Reduced risk of stroke
- Reduced risk of gallstones
- Reduced risk of kidney stones
- Reduced risk of diabetes
- Reduced risk of rheumatoid arthritis
- Reduced risk of metabolic syndrome
- Reduced risk of dementia, including Alzheimer's disease

Long-Term Effects of Drinking Too Much over a Period of Years

- Liver damage
- Stomach ulcers and irritation to the pancreas
- Prevention of the kidneys from maintaining a proper balance of fluids and minerals
- Widening of the veins and arteries, resulting in headaches and loss of body heat
- Reduction of the body's ability to produce red blood cells, resulting in anemia and infections
- Muscle weakness, including of the heart muscle

In addition to these systemic effects, alcohol also may have a greater impact on teens than it does on those adults over the age of 20. There is evidence that alcohol has less of a sedating effect on young people, so they are more likely to think that they can drive safely. Because their judgment and coordination may be impaired, and because of their lack of extensive driving experience, their chances of having a car accident increase. Some teens also show signs of reduced function in the hippocampus, the part of the brain critical for forming new memories.

Parents and other adults over age 20 often drink in moderation. Doing so is responsible if they are not pregnant, taking certain medications, or drinking is not otherwise contraindicated. Drinking in moderation is associated with better health and longer life than is either not drinking or abusing alcohol. A drink a day for a woman and two drinks a day for men is considered moderate consumption by the federal government.

It's very important to know that standard drinks of beer, dinner wine, and distilled spirits (liquor) contain an equivalent amount of alcohol (6/10 of one ounce). Standard drinks are a 12-ounce can or bottle of beer, a five-ounce glass of dinner wine, and a shot (1 and ½ ounces of distilled spirits, either straight or in a mixed drink). It takes over an hour for the alcohol in a standard drink to work its way out of the body. Drinking coffee, taking cold showers, or exercising does not speed up this process.