

FACT SHEET: ALCOHOL

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There are many reasons why teens drink, including the social pressure to fit in, the idea that most of their friends are drinking, or because they simply don't realize how harmful it can be to their developing brain and body.

Drinking during the teen years can interfere with normal brain development and lead to issues with alcohol later in life.

Q & A

Why is the drinking age 21?

The age limit for alcohol is based on research showing that young people react differently to alcohol; their bodies respond twice as quickly as adults do, yet they have difficulty knowing when to stop.

What's the big deal?

Alcohol impairs teens' judgment and lowers inhibitions for both young women and men. They do things they otherwise might not do and are more likely to get into dangerous situations such as driving under the influence or riding with an impaired driver.

Underage drinking can also affect social development, especially if teens rely on alcohol as a means of coping. Studies show that young people who use alcohol may have difficulty making lasting friendships.

Can parents teach their teens how to drink responsibly by giving them small amounts?

There's no evidence that this approach actually works and there is evidence to the contrary.¹ When teens feel they have their parents' approval to drink, they tend to drink more often and in larger amounts. When parents have concrete, enforced rules about alcohol, young people drink less.

OTHER HEALTH EFFECTS OF ALCOHOL



Alcohol disrupts sleep. Alcohol can interfere with sleep patterns by reducing time spent in deep restful sleep.



Alcohol is a diuretic causing the body to lose important vitamins and minerals required for athletic performance.



Alcohol disrupts the muscle-building process as alcohol is metabolized first, pushing aside other nutrients needed for muscle recovery.



Alcohol spikes the production of cortisol, the body's stress hormone, which impairs thinking, raises blood pressure, decreases bone density and muscle tissue, and increases abdominal fat.

With all of these effects, it's no surprise that alcohol reduces performance potential by as much as 20-30% in high school athletes. A night of drinking can erase two weeks of working out.²



ALCOHOL AND THE TEEN BRAIN

The age limit for alcohol is based on the fact that a young person's brain is still undergoing some important development which continues well into adulthood. Using alcohol or drugs during this development can actually rewire the brain for addiction as it interferes with the reward center of the brain. Research shows that when teens start using at a young age, they are more likely to continue the habit into adulthood. In fact, teens who begin drinking before age 15 are six times more likely to develop a problem with alcohol later in life than those who begin drinking after age 21.³

1. *Fell, James. From "Chapter 2: Federalism: Resolved, the Federal Government should restore each State's freedom to set its drinking age." in Ellis, Richard and Nelson, Michael (eds.) Debating Reform. CQPress Publishers, Fall 2009.*
2. <http://www.americanathleticinstitute.org/>
3. <https://www.cdc.gov/>