

Underage Drinking: A Major Challenge

By the time they reach the eighth grade, nearly 50 percent of adolescents have had at least one drink, and over 20 percent report having been “drunk”. Approximately 20 percent of 8th graders and almost 50 percent of 12th graders have consumed alcohol within the past 30 days. Among 12th graders, almost 30 percent report drinking on 3 or more occasions per month. Approximately 30 percent of 12th graders engage in heavy episodic drinking, now popularly termed “binge” drinking—that is, having at least five or more drinks on one occasion within the past 2 weeks—and it is estimated that 20 percent do so on more than one occasion.

Apart from being illegal, underage drinking poses a high risk to both the individual and society. For example, the rate of alcohol-related traffic crashes is greater for drivers ages 16 to 20 than for drivers age 21 and older . Adolescents also are vulnerable to alcohol-induced brain damage, which could contribute to poor performance at school or work. In addition, youthful drinking is associated with an increased likelihood of developing alcohol abuse or dependence later in life. Early intervention is essential to prevent the development of serious alcohol problems among youth between the ages of 12 and 20. This *Alcohol Alert* describes some of the most harmful consequences of underage drinking as well as prevention and treatment approaches that can be applied successfully to meet the unique needs of this age group.

Injury and Social Consequences

Underage alcohol use is more likely to kill young people than all illegal drugs combined. Some of the most serious and widespread alcohol-related problems among adolescents are listed below.

Drinking and Driving. Motor vehicle crashes are the leading cause of death among youth ages 15 to 20.

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.

Alcohol’s Effects on the Brain

Adolescence is the transition between childhood and adulthood. During this time, significant changes occur in the body, including rapid hormonal alterations and the formation of new networks in the brain. Adolescence is also a time of trying new experiences and activities that emphasize socializing with peers, and conforming to peer-group standards . These new activities may place young people at particular risk for initiating and continuing alcohol consumption. Exposing the brain to alcohol during this period may interrupt key processes of brain development, possibly leading to mild cognitive impairment as well as to further escalation of drinking.

The Sheriff’s Office has a zero tolerance policy when it comes to underage alcohol consumption. I have heard many excuses as to why teens are allowed to consume alcohol from “well it is better than using drugs” or “its only beer”. Well these excuses do not work.

My deputies and I have an obligation to protect the citizens that live in this county and those who are traveling through. When your son or daughter receives a ticket for underage consumption or when you receive a call from law enforcement that you need to come and pick up your child, I would look at that as being a good thing. The alternative would be having law enforcement show up and tell you that you son or daughter has just been killed in an accident. Think before you drink!!!

