PREVENTION OF UNDERAGE DRINKING

Although the percentage of underage drinkers has been on the decline, the number of teens who report drinking alcohol is still alarmingly high. Multiple research studies conducted in recent years indicates that by age 18, more than 70% of teens have had at least one drink with 22% of teens reporting they had engaged in binge drinking (5+ drinks at a time) within the last 30 days. This week, the New Jersey Prevention Network (NJPN) has joined with SAMHSA and organizations across the nation to continue prevention efforts aimed at speeding the downward trend of underage drinking. This focused effort at raising awareness is in conjunction with National Prevention Week.

“Alcohol is one of the most widely abused substances among young Americans,” said Diane Litterer, NJPN CEO and Executive Director. “As researchers study the way the human brain develops, we are learning that the brain is not fully developed until we’re into our mid-twenties and the teen years represent a very active, important stage of this growth. This is an important fact for parents and teens to understand as alcohol can interfere with the normal development of the brain in a way that may have lasting effects well into adulthood. In fact,” Litterer continues, “in a presentation on Alcohol and the Adolescent Brain given at NJPN’s Annual Addiction Conference earlier this year, Dr. Aaron White of the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA) enumerated the short term and long term impact underage drinking can have on executive function, attention and memory.”

Additional important facts regarding underage drinking include:

• Annually approximately 5,000 people under age 21 die each year from alcohol-related car crashes, homicides, suicides, alcohol poisoning, and other injuries such as falls, burns, and drowning. In addition, in 2008 alone, nearly 200,000 visited an emergency room for alcohol related injuries.

• Studies have found that teens that drink at home, either with parents or supervised by parents, are more likely to binge drink outside the home.

• Research comparing binge drinking in the US to 14 other countries that legally permit drinking under the age of 21 indicates that the younger drinking age negatively impacts the likelihood of binge drinking in teens, which counters the misconception that Europe’s younger drinking age is a better alternative to the United States existing parameters. In the studies referenced by Dr. White at NJPN’s conference, only Turkey reported a lower rate of binge drinking in 15-16 year olds than the United States in the 15 country comparison. In the US, 22% of teens reported binge drinking at least once in 30 days, whereas Denmark topped out the list with 60%.
Additional important facts regarding underage drinking include:\(^1\):

- Underage drinking’s long term effects can include alcoholism in adulthood. Studies have found that those who begin drinking by 15 years old are five to seven times more likely to abuse or become dependent on alcohol than those who begin drinking after age 21 years old.

- Underage drinking is more than a teen-issue. Approximately 10% of 9 to 10 year olds have begun drinking.

- Young drinkers are more prone than their non-drinking peers to depression and anxiety, more likely to be sexually active, including engaging in unprotected sex, more likely to use illicit drugs, and more likely to struggle in school. Young drinkers are also at higher risk for physical or sexual assault.

- Research has shown that involved parents that know what’s going on in their child’s lives, set expectations about alcohol use, and model healthy behaviors, are less likely to have children that engage in underage drinking. In fact, more than 80% of children list their parents as an influence in their decision whether to drink or not.

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\(^1\)Information culled from:
- Centers for Disease Control
- U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.
- SAMHSA’s “Talk! They Hear You” campaign
- National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA)
- Monitoring the Future Study (www.monitoringthefuture.org).
- Surgeon General
- National Survey on Drug and Alcohol Use
- US Dept of Justice
- Office of Applied Studies