

Underage Drinking Facts

Alcohol use by persons under age 21 years is a major public health problem. Alcohol is the most commonly used and abused drug among youth in the United States, more than tobacco and illicit drugs, and is responsible for more than 4,700 annual deaths among underage youth. Although drinking by persons under the age of 21 is illegal, people aged 12 to 20 years drink 11% of all alcohol consumed in the United States. More than 90% of this alcohol is consumed in the form of binge drinks. On average, underage drinkers consume more drinks per drinking occasion than adult drinkers. In 2010, there were approximately 189,000 emergency room visits by persons under age 21 for injuries and other conditions linked to alcohol.

Drinking Levels among Youth

The 2011 Youth Risk Behavior Survey found that among high school students, during the past 30 days

- 39% drank some amount of alcohol.
- 22% binge drank.
- 8% drove after drinking alcohol.
- 24% rode with a driver who had been drinking alcohol.

Other national surveys:

- In 2011 the [National Survey on Drug Use and Health](#) reported that 25% of youth aged 12 to 20 years drink alcohol and 16% reported binge drinking.
- In 2011, the [Monitoring the Future Survey](#) reported that 33% of 8th graders and 70% of 12th graders had tried alcohol, and 13% of 8th graders and 40% of 12th graders drank during the past month.

Consequences of Underage Drinking

Youth who drink alcohol are more likely to experience:

- School problems, such as higher absence and poor or failing grades.
- Social problems, such as fighting and lack of participation in youth activities.
- Legal problems, such as arrest for driving or physically hurting someone while drunk.
- Physical problems, such as hangovers or illnesses.
- Unwanted, unplanned, and unprotected sexual activity.
- Disruption of normal growth and sexual development.
- Physical and sexual assault.
- Higher risk for suicide and homicide.
- Alcohol-related car crashes and other unintentional injuries, such as burns, falls, and drowning.
- Memory problems.
- Abuse of other drugs.
- Changes in brain development that may have life-long effects.
- Death from alcohol poisoning.

In general, the risk of youth experiencing these problems is greater for those who binge drink than for those who do not binge drink.

Youth who start drinking before age 15 years are five times more likely to develop [alcohol dependence or abuse](#) later in life than those who begin drinking at or after age 21 years.

Prevention of Underage Drinking

Reducing underage drinking will require community-based efforts to monitor the activities of youth and decrease youth access to alcohol. Recent publications by the Surgeon General and the Institute of Medicine outlined many prevention strategies that will require actions on the national, state, and local levels, such as enforcement of minimum legal drinking age laws, national media campaigns targeting youth and adults, increasing alcohol excise taxes, reducing youth exposure to alcohol advertising, and development of comprehensive community-based programs. These efforts will require continued research.