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# HOW TO APPROACH ISSUES OF ALCOHOL & OTHER DRUG USE WITH YOUR TEEN

A PARENT ACTION PACK RESOURCE



## **So many teenagers have begun to drink at parties by the middle of high school. How can I prevent my teen from joining in?**

You can't necessarily "prevent" your teen from drinking or other activities! Teens make these decisions when their parents aren't around. We do know that some underage drinking, especially in the older teenage years, is common. Parents can give a clear message to their teenagers about drinking ("I don't want you to drink at this stage of your life because it puts your personal safety at risk") and have a surprising amount of influence. Discuss with your teens what choices they have when they find themselves in a situation where some of their friends may be drinking. If you find that your teen is drinking at parties, you may want to focus on ways that they can increase their safety and responsible decision-making in these situations.

## **What are the dangers of teenage drinking, as long as my teen doesn't drink and drive?**

There are many dangers associated with drinking during the teenage years. Even with just a few drinks, alcohol begins to affect judgment. Drinkers then may make decisions that put their own and others' health and safety at risk. Teenagers themselves readily admit that when they drink they often behave in ways they later regret. This can range from "acting stupid" to saying something rude to a friend or getting involved sexually. Fights, damage to property, injuries, unwanted pregnancy, STDs (sexually transmitted diseases), trying other drugs and riding with an impaired driver are all possible harmful outcomes of teenage drinking. Young drivers who have not been drinking themselves (as "the designated driver") are also at risk if they have drunk passengers. Their ability to drive safely can be seriously challenged in this situation.

Sometimes party drinking takes the form of "chugging" or "funneling" -- power drinking or contests where young people drink as much as they can as quickly as they can. This is particularly risky, because drinking in this manner can cause severe intoxication ("alcohol poisoning") leading to stoppage of breathing and even death. Death can also occur because a person becomes unconscious and chokes on his or her own vomit. Parents need to discuss with their teens about calling for emergency assistance when they find someone in this situation.

## **Isn't it better if teenagers are allowed to drink in their own home, so they don't feel it's something to "get away with"?**

Many parents do feel that if alcohol is not made to be the "forbidden fruit", it will lose some of its attraction for a teenager. In fact, most young people are introduced to drinking in their own homes. However, there is a clear difference between the underage (but legal) drinking in a family situation (such as at times of celebration or on a religious holiday) and the kind of drinking that underage teenagers do with their friends. This kind of party drinking tends to be unrestrained and is in fact, illegal. Having a parent present in the home when there is a teenage drinking party does not prevent the harmful or legal consequences of underage drinking. Some recent studies have found that adult supervised teen drinking can actually increase the potential for problems with teen drinking.

## **Is the marijuana available today different than the marijuana of the 60's and 70's?**

The strength of marijuana has increased – even compared to twenty years ago. Today different varieties of marijuana are being grown across North America, much of it indoors, or “hydroponically”. Using up-to-date growing techniques, marijuana growers are able to cross-cultivate different varieties to create new and unique types of marijuana. Today’s marijuana has a consistently higher level of THC, the “psychoactive” component of marijuana.

## **Is marijuana less harmful than tobacco or alcohol?**

The harmful effects of tobacco use and alcohol abuse on individuals and society are well known. For example, we know that tobacco is the leading cause of preventable lung cancer deaths in Canada. And we are aware that sexual assaults, domestic violence and many traffic injuries and deaths are closely linked to alcohol abuse. Marijuana is not in these categories.

However, marijuana shares some harmful health effects in common with tobacco, such as the cancer-causing agents and damage to the breathing system. Marijuana has similar harmful effects as alcohol, such as impaired judgment, coordination and concentration. Marijuana use also poses risks to work place and traffic safety. Evidence is beginning to show that long-term marijuana use poses a risk for memory and selective attention that nicotine or moderate daily drinking is not associated with.

## **I've seen people smoking marijuana as if it is legal. What are the legal consequences if someone is caught with marijuana?**

Changes to the laws affecting marijuana have been proposed over years, but the fact is that marijuana possession is illegal in Canada. It is a criminal offence to export, import, possess, grow, sell, give or traffic marijuana, or to possess marijuana for the purpose of trafficking. While people who are convicted of marijuana possession for the first time could receive a fine or a discharge, they could end up with a criminal record. And having a conviction can lead to future restrictions for a person.

## **I've read about the health benefits of caffeine. Why is caffeine presented as a concern?**

Many adults enjoy the effects of drinking caffeinated beverages, like coffee, tea and colas. There have been a number of studies which have looked at the possible adverse effects of caffeine, so that Health Canada recommends that healthy adults limit their intake of caffeine to 400 mg a day (about two regular sized cups of coffee). The concern is that children and adolescents are much more vulnerable to the effects of caffeine. And when they are drinking high caffeine energy drinks (as the statistics show they are) they are getting higher amounts of caffeine and other stimulants than recommended for their health. A great concern is that as teens get older and begin drinking alcohol, the combination of alcohol and energy drinks increases the risk of injuries, sexual assault, impaired driving and alcohol poisoning.

## **I don't have young children in my home. Why should I be concerned about storing my medications?**

Canadians are among the heaviest users of medications like pain relievers, tranquilizers, stimulants and sedatives in the world. That means that many of us have these drugs stored in our homes for many months after we have obtained them. Now we see a growing number of youth who are using prescription and over-the-counter drugs to get high – and most say they got these drugs from their homes. Disposing of these drugs in a safe and timely fashion has become a very important issue, both for the environment and for the safety of our children. Many pharmacies have medication return programs which will help parents dispose of these drugs properly.

## **What is “harm reduction”? Is this an approach I should take with my teen?**

Harm reduction is the approach that our first priority should be to reduce the problems and harms associated with alcohol and other drug use. An example of this approach would be supporting a Designated Driver initiative. Having a designated driver does not condone alcohol use, but it does allow others to drink more safely. It is based on the knowledge that impaired driving can cause irrevocable damage and that designating a non-drinking driver reduces the risks for the driver, for those who have been drinking and for others on the road.

## **I can't be around when my teen makes decisions about using alcohol or other drugs, so what can I do to help them stay safe?**

Many parents who advise their children against drinking and use of any drug will add, as their bottom line, that if their teens do happen to drink or use drugs, they can call their parents to ensure they have a safe way to get home. Parents who do not want their children to use alcohol can still warn their teens to never leave their drink (alcoholic or non-alcoholic) unattended at a party or take a drink from anyone, in order to prevent a drug from being slipped into their drink. Particularly as teens grow older and parents realize that they have begun to drink, parents can discuss with their teens ways to increase their personal safety, for example by having a sober ‘buddy’ around.

There is strong evidence that if teens do choose to drink during their later teen years by limiting the amount they drink on one occasion (for example, one or two drinks at most) they can decrease the associated risks and avoid the harms of being drunk. Parents can discuss this option for increased safety with their teens even if they prefer their teen not to drink at all.

Parents can also make sure that their teenage children have all the facts about tobacco, alcohol, and other drugs, so that when their teens do need to make their own choices about drug use, they can do so based on accurate information. Informed teens will take precautions to decrease the problems that smoking, drinking or drug use can bring. In giving these “harm reduction” messages parents can continue to emphasize to their children that the most certain way to protect their personal safety is to not drink or use any drugs at all.