

Schools

*Health Talk

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Teens and drinking

Why is 21 the Legal Drinking Age?

In 1984, due to the significant number of alcohol-related highway deaths, President Ronald Reagan passed a law mandating states to raise the drinking age from 18 to 21 or risk losing a large sum of federal funding.

Since then, numerous and extensive medical studies have proven 21 to be a more logical age when it comes to alcohol consumption. Simply put, teens are not physically equipped to consume alcohol. The teenage brain has not developed enough to handle the complications from drinking, nor the temptation to avoid it.

Brain Development in Teens

During adolescence, the brain is molded by experiences that often carry into adulthood. It is a critical time in brain development. New neurons are born in the brain throughout one's lifetime and the peak is during adolescence. Alcohol affects the brain immensely during this phase of life and may have lasting, profound effects on brain structure and function.

The frontal lobe of the brain is not fully developed until the mid-20's and is the area of the brain that controls impulse and decision making.

In adolescence the brain signals are heightened when it comes to the "reward" mechanism in the brain. Like virtually all drugs used for pleasure and relaxation, alcohol activates the reward system, thus tricking the brain into thinking that something important and worth repeating just happened.

Each time the behavior is repeated and reinforced, the odds go up that alcohol will be consumed again. This is a tricky venture for adolescents, whose frontal lobes are still under construction and already have difficulty controlling impulses.

It is a fact that a teenager is three times more likely to become addicted to a habit than adults are. National research shows those who start drinking before the age of 15, are four times more likely to develop alcohol dependency and alcohol-related issues later in life.



Be a Parent: Teens already have Friends

In Fountain Hills, approximately 73 percent of 12th graders who reported drinking, said they got alcohol at a party and almost 17 percent said they took it from home (2012 Arizona Youth Survey).

Join the Safe Homes Network and join other parents working to help keep their kids safe from underage drinking parties. Lock up your alcohol if you have reason to believe your child is obtaining it from your home. And talk!

When parents don't talk about it, they are passively still saying something.

Maria Perreault is Program Manager of the FH Coalition, a non-profit youth substance-abuse prevention group. For information on The Coalition and Safe Homes Network, contact Maria at: maria.prmediaworks@cox.net.

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