

Dying for the Next Drink - College Binge Drinking

The truth is that most college students drink alcohol.

A few college kids will have just a couple of beers, many will have upwards of a dozen drinks, and others will drink up to thirty drinks in one sitting. Some kids will get alcohol poisoning and some will die. Binge drinking is common for nearly half of all college kids.



- If this year is typical, 1,400 college kids will die of alcohol poisoning, 70,000 will suffer a sexual assault, and half a million college kids will have an injury accident while drinking.
- Most victims of sexual assault and of the vast majority of the sexual assailants will be under the influence.
- Most sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV, are contracted while under the influence.
- Members of fraternities, sororities, and athletes are among the heaviest drinkers.
- Alcohol is much more of a recreation than a beverage in college. The purpose of drinking for many is to become intoxicated.
- Substance abuse patterns established in high school are often predictive of failure in college.
- The alcohol-related traffic fatality rates for 18-20 years olds are nearly double those for people over 21.
- There is a direct relationship between the number of drinks consumed per week and poor academic performance.
- Alcoholic beverage companies market specifically to college students despite the illegality of such beverages for most students. College students consume an estimated \$9.6 billion in alcohol yearly.
- Each year 1.8 million Freshmen enter college. Hundreds of thousands will drop out due to behavioral health and substance abuse-related problems. The economic costs are staggering.
- Many parents and many students see alcohol consumption in college as part of a “rite of passage” and tend to discount the dangers associated with excessive drinking.



What College Students Can Do

You are building your future one decision at a time and your choices surrounding alcohol can be an important part of that equation. Think carefully about your potential for developing alcoholism and the impact of your drinking on your health, your grades, your relationships, and your finances. If you are drinking regularly to excess or have a family history of alcoholism, you may already have a couple of strikes against you. Think about the person you want to become, take steps toward those goals, and avoid decisions that will get in your way.

If you are going to drink, set a limit on yourself (perhaps 2 or 3) and make certain that you don't go over it. Being with a supportive friend may be useful if they drink less than you.

Consider the impact of your peer group. People's behavior tends to match those of the crowd with whom they associate.

Think about recreational alternatives to partying on weekends (bowling, movies, swim party, volleyball, camping).

Pick a party and decide not to drink, but carefully observe those who do. When you are intoxicated, do YOU have slurred speech, fall into the swimming pool, drive under the influence, become promiscuous, do stupid things, become loud, vomit, or fall down? Think about the person who you want to be.



Consider spending at least some weekends at home (or with responsible people) if the temptation to party becomes challenging.

If you simply want to *cut down* on the amount that you drink, set a specific goal for the amount that you'll drink, keep track of the amount that you drink by keeping a log, drink slowly, arrive late for events where drinking is apt to take place, and take breaks of a day or two from drinking at all. If you find that you feel better on non-drinking days, it may motivate you to drink less. If you find that you're pre-occupied with alcohol on non-drinking days or have 'cravings' to drink, you may be developing alcoholism and need support to quit before it takes over your life. Right now, if you are saying to yourself, "there's no way that I could be happy if I don't drink," you probably already have an alcohol problem. Get some help.



Consider your faith. Students who are involved in their religion are often among those with the least problems associated with substance abuse. If you've drifted away from your values, you can reconnect. People who make positive decisions tend to associate with others that do the same. Consider volunteer activities that fill some time, provide support to others, and foster positive feelings within yourself.

Self-help and peer support programs like *Alcoholic Anonymous* are numerous and can be very helpful. Many college students especially appreciate the high energy and enthusiastic support found at meetings designated for "young people." Meeting lists for AA and other self-help programs can be found on the Internet.

Become aware of the signs of alcohol poisoning and be prepared to provide support if you find a peer who is has passed out and cannot be awakened, is vomiting, is suffering from confusion or is in a stupor, has a seizure, is breathing less than eight breaths a minute, has irregular breathing, has blue-tinged skin or pale skin, and/or a low body temperature. Calling the local poison control center at 800-222-1222, calling an ambulance, or getting them to emergency medical services may save their life.

If you find yourself drinking more than you planned or have established a pattern of alcohol abuse, consider going to the university counseling center to assess your potential for alcohol-related difficulties.



What Parents Can Do

Being the parent of a kid at college is scary and that fear can become a nightmare if your daughter or son appears to be making poor decisions that have the potential for lifelong consequences. As parents, we see our job as providing direction and support. We often evaluate our success as parents on the decisions that our college kids make. When they go off the college, we know that we no longer have much control AND may feel powerless.

You don't have "control" any longer, but you should consider your power to influence their decisions.

An honest talk is a good place to start if you have reason to suspect substance abuse (including excessive drinking). Listen to your college student, make an effort to understand what it is like for them, and work to avoid letting the strong feelings you may have from limiting the openness of the communication.

Consider the impact of your daughter or son's biological inheritance. If family members have a history of alcoholism or problem drinking, it is probably that they have the genetic makeup that will make alcohol a problem for them as well.

Kids also learn from us as models - if parents drink excessively, the kids are apt to see the consumption of large quantities of alcohol as 'normal.' If we recognize and address any alcohol that we may have, it is very likely that we will increase our ability our kid's decisions.

Understand that you are most apt to be the funding source for your son or daughter's alcohol (or drugs). If drinking (or drug use) is problematic, it may be wise to limit the availability of cash, purchase their housing, meal cards, utilities, or gasoline directly rather than giving them money that might be spent unwisely.

If a pattern of substance abuse has already become established, counseling either at a university counseling center or from a private practitioner is apt to be useful. Group therapy or intensive outpatient programs have the edge in terms of effectiveness. Your daughter or son might need some help in selecting a professional with clear expertise with substance use disorders.



Invite your son or daughter to family activities that don't involve drinking.

Encouraging (or requiring) a part-time job may limit the amount of time that is available for partying and may also foster a greater sense of responsibility.

If your daughter or son appears intoxicated, but has not been drinking, consider that drug use may be a problem.

The pressures of a university environment may be overwhelming, especially for Freshmen. A year or two at a community college might be useful, especially for younger or more impulsive students.