

Educate Yourself

FACTS about DRUGS: ALCOHOL

WHAT IS IT?

Alcohol is the oldest and most widely used drug in the world. Distilled spirits/hard liquor, grain alcohol, hard cider, wine, and beer are created through fermentation—yeast feeding on sugars to create alcohol and carbon dioxide as by-products.

SLANG

The act of drinking alcohol to excess may be described as getting drunk, smashed, sloshed, wasted, sauced, hammered, bombed, juiced, slammed, inebriated, blasted, or blitzed.

AVAILABILITY & USE

Despite laws restricting underage drinking, alcohol remains easily accessible to young people. Teens report that they most commonly obtain alcohol from, and are most likely to drink in, their own homes and the homes of their peers (New York Times 2002).

For teens buying alcohol illegally, the price can vary. For example, a 40-ounce bottle of malt liquor can cost \$3, a 4-pack of wine coolers can cost \$6, and a 12-pack of beer can cost about \$9.

RATES OF USE

In 2001, 47 percent of eighth graders reported that they had used alcohol at least once. Among high school seniors, 78 percent reported that they had tried alcohol and 62 percent report having been drunk at least once (Johnston 2003).

THE HIGH

As with all psychoactive drugs, social context influences the experience of alcohol. Lone drinkers may feel more withdrawn, while those drinking within a group may become more social. At low concentrations, alcohol may produce a sense of euphoria, warmth, and relaxation, and reduce inhibitions.

(continued next page)

THE RISKS

As a depressant, alcohol slows the central nervous system, impairs reflexes, reduces muscular response, and affects judgment. These factors are what make driving a car while under the influence of alcohol so dangerous. In addition, those engaging in sexual activities while under the influence are more likely to have unprotected or non-consensual sex.

Binge drinking (drinking large quantities in a short period) can be lethal. A lethal dose of alcohol is a blood alcohol level (BAL) between 0.40 and 0.50. Body size and existing tolerance to alcohol influence how quickly a person will reach this level of intoxication. Any BAL is illegal for those under the age of twenty-one.

Alcohol is an addictive substance. There are four generally accepted criteria for determining alcoholism:

1. Drinking a substantial amount of alcohol over a specific time period;
2. Psychological dependency — requiring alcohol to function;
3. Physical dependency — showing withdrawal symptoms when attempting to quit; and
4. Life problems that have resulted from drinking (Goode 1999).

Alcohol is responsible for approximately 10 percent of all deaths and alcoholism reduces life expectancy by about fifteen years (Goode 1999). Adverse health effects of alcohol misuse include cirrhosis of the liver, fetal alcohol syndrome, nerve damage, loss of intelligence, and amnesia.

(continued next page)

SIGNS OF USE

Common signs of drinking include the lingering smell of alcohol on the breath, slurred speech, loss of motor control, poor judgment, aggressiveness, and wildness. Excessive drinking may also lead to vomiting, falling asleep, or passing out.

RECOMMENDED READING

Goode, Erich. 1999. *Drugs in American Society*. Boston: McGraw Hill College. ISBN: 0070244952.

Weil, Andrew and Winifred Rosen. 1998. *From Chocolate to Morphine: Everything You Need to Know about Mind-Altering Drugs*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co. ISBN: 0395911524.

REFERENCES

Goode, Erich. 1999. *Drugs in American Society*. Boston: McGraw Hill College.

Johnston, L.D, P.M. O'Malley and J.G. Bachman. 2003. *Monitoring the Future national survey results on drug use, 1975-2002. Volume I: Secondary school students*. Bethesda, MD: National Institute on Drug Abuse. <http://www.monitoringthefuture.org>.

New York Times. 2002. Underage drinking in US is on the rise. February 26.

THE RISKS (cont.)

Research indicates there is also a link between alcohol and violence, although it does not seem to be a causal relationship. Statistics show that a high percentage of violent crime, including sexual assault, occurs when perpetrators and/or victims are under the influence of alcohol.

The best way to eliminate the risks associated with alcohol use is to abstain. Short of abstinence, reducing risks requires not drinking on an empty stomach; not drinking and driving; not accepting a ride from someone who has been drinking; not engaging in "chugging" contests; not mixing alcohol with other drugs (including prescription drugs); knowing one's own reaction to alcohol (everyone is different); and not drinking around strangers.

ABOUT SAFETY FIRST

Safety First, a project of the Drug Policy Alliance, is dedicated to providing parents of adolescents with honest, science-based information about drugs and drug education. For more information, visit www.safety1st.org.

Safety First
2233 Lombard Street
San Francisco, CA 94123
T: 415.921.4987
F: 415.921.1912
E: info@safety1st.org
W: www.safety1st.org

© 2003 Drug Policy Alliance

This fact sheet may be reproduced for educational, non-commercial purposes, provided it is printed in its entirety and proper credit is given.



a project of the Drug Policy Alliance