



AFTER HIGH SCHOOL: TALKING WITH YOUR YOUNG ADULT ABOUT UNDERAGE DRINKING

THEIR NEXT PHASE OF LIFE

While they're wrapping up high school studies and obligations, high school seniors make important decisions about the rest of their lives. Some choose to pursue a college degree immediately, and others may decide to join the workforce or military or delay college enrollment.

The quest for independence and self-reliance can be exciting. But it also can increase stress levels and lead to a variety of unhealthy behaviors—like underage drinking.^{1,2} Research shows that the brain continues to develop into the 20s, so alcohol use can damage young adults' maturing brains—just as they're starting the next phase of their lives.^{3,4}

UNDERAGE DRINKING AFTER HIGH SCHOOL

Underage drinking is prevalent after seniors graduate from high school. After graduating from high school young adults tend to drink more each year—even before they turn 21 and are legally allowed to drink.⁵

YOUNG ADULTS AND ALCOHOL

In 2021, 18- to 22-year-olds who did not attend college reported using alcohol in the past month.*

- **Nearly 40 percent** used alcohol.
- **Roughly 23 percent** reported binge drinking.
- **About 5 percent** reported drinking heavily.

*Numbers from the Detailed Tables have been rounded to the nearest hundred thousands or nearest whole percent.
Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, Center for Behavioral Health Statistics and Quality, National Survey on Drug Use and Health, 2021.

Binge drinking at any age is associated with short- and long-term consequences, such as:

- Unintentional injuries (e.g., car crashes, falls, burns, drowning);
- Intentional injuries (e.g., firearm injuries, sexual assault, domestic violence);
- Alcohol poisoning;
- Sexually transmitted diseases; and
- Unintended pregnancy.⁶

Young adults entering the workforce are exposed to—and spend more time with—older coworkers who may become influencers on issues like alcohol use.⁷ This is particularly true in industries where heavy alcohol use is common among employees. For example, there is a higher heavy alcohol use among people aged 18 to 64 who work in the construction industry than for other industries.⁸

If young adults find themselves temporarily unemployed, they're still at risk. Research shows that unemployed young adults are more likely to be daily drinkers than their peers. This increases their likelihood of engaging in risky behaviors that have serious consequences, like drinking and driving.⁹

BINGE DRINKING

- **Binge Drinking:** Drinking five or more alcoholic drinks for males or four or more alcoholic drinks for females on the same occasion on at least one day in the past 30 days.
- **Heavy Drinking:** Binge drinking on 5 or more days in the past 30 days; all heavy alcohol users are also binge alcohol users.

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (2022). Key substance use and mental health indicators in the United States: Results from the 2021 National Survey on Drug Use and Health (HHS Publication No. PEPP22-07-01-005, NSDUH Series H-57). Center for Behavioral Health Statistics and Quality, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. <https://www.samhsa.gov/data/report/2021-nsduh-annual-national-report>

YOUR GUIDANCE MATTERS

You can help the young adults in your life make healthy choices in their late teens and early 20s. It may be as simple as talking with them about the consequences of underage drinking. Even though they are branching out on their own, you have a positive influence on choices affecting their health and future.

Your guidance matters. In fact, research shows that young adults whose parents made rules about drinking were less likely to drink as they grew and became independent.¹⁰ It's crucial that you communicate openly and clearly with your young adult about alcohol and the behavior you expect.

Plus, if you commit to knowing more about them—what they're doing, who they're with, where they are—you're more likely to have a positive effect on their behavior.

LEARN MORE ABOUT UNDERAGE DRINKING
AT WWW.SAMHSA.GOV

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STARTING THE CONVERSATION

Research shows that parents and caregivers who express disapproval of underage drinking protect young adults from most alcohol use and related consequences, even if a young person is already using alcohol.¹¹

Make it a point to get the conversation started. Look for everyday opportunities to raise the topic. Conversations about career choices, coworkers, or workplace challenges can include a discussion about pressures to drink and the potential consequences.

CONVERSATION GOALS

- **Highlight that underage drinking can hurt their health and limit job success.**
- **Make your “no underage alcohol use” position clear.**
- **Help find activities that don’t involve alcohol.**

But conversations about alcohol don’t always have to relate to work. You can also share recent news or social media stories about underage drinking, or use an example from a current TV show your young adult watches. If your family or social circles have examples, use those, too.

Instead of lecturing, talk with your young adult about alcohol in ways that show you care about, trust, and respect their growing independence. Try to suggest activities that don’t involve drinking, like joining a sports league, an outreach or faith-based group, or a volunteer or community organization—but make your own position about underage alcohol use clear.

IT’S THE LAW

Explain to your young adult that an arrest and conviction record can make it hard to get a job or move ahead in their career. All states and the District of Columbia have 21-year-old minimum drinking age laws and, in most states, 21 is the minimum legal age for the purchase or public possession of alcohol.

<https://www.stopalcoholabuse.gov/about-iccpud/data/national-reports/report-to-congress/default.aspx>

If your young adult is struggling to transition to adulthood, discuss ways to cope with any related negative feelings. In general, mental health issues like depression and anxiety tend to increase among this age group—and so does the risk for alcohol use disorders.^{12,13} Be prepared to help your young adult find mental health treatment, if necessary. One place to look for resources is <https://findtreatment.gov/>.

Come back to the conversation about underage drinking so your young adults have repeated exposure and plenty of time to digest the information before they go off on their own. And remember: What you say can make a world of difference. Start the conversation today.

For more information and resources about talking with your young adult about underage drinking, visit [STOPALCOHOLABUSE.GOV](https://www.stopalcoholabuse.gov).

SOURCES

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