



As college students arrive on campus this fall, it is typically a time of new experiences, new friendships, and making memories that will last a lifetime. Unfortunately for many, it is also a time of harmful and underage drinking and of dealing with its aftermath—from vandalism, sexual aggression, and other forms of violence to injuries and death. In light of the current coronavirus pandemic, it is particularly important this fall for parents to urge college students to take measures to protect their health.

Alcohol and COVID-19 Don't Mix—Encourage Additional Caution About Alcohol During the Pandemic

Drinking alcohol impairs both physical and mental abilities, and it also decreases inhibitions. Reduced inhibitions from drinking and being intoxicated may affect a young person's ability to take the precautions needed to reduce the risk of contracting the coronavirus or spreading it to others, such as maintaining appropriate physical distance and wearing a mask. Encourage students to limit how much alcohol they or friends are consuming and remind underage students not to drink any alcohol. Students should also know the steps needed to protect themselves and others from COVID-19 if schools have resumed in-person or hybrid classes or while participating in activities outside of school. This includes following the everyday practices recommended by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) to [reduce the risk of contracting and spreading the coronavirus](#), as well as following all guidelines and procedures that have been established by individual colleges and universities.

Rates and Consequences of College Drinking

According to the 2019 National Survey on Drug Use and Health (NSDUH), 52.5 percent of full-time college students ages 18 to 22 drank alcohol in the past month, and 33.0 percent engaged in binge drinking in the past month. NSDUH defines binge drinking as 5 or more drinks on an occasion for men and 4 or more drinks on an occasion for women.* In addition, 8.2 percent engaged in heavy alcohol use (defined by NSDUH as binge drinking on 5 or more days in the past month). These binge drinking and heavy alcohol use rates are both higher than for those not attending college.¹

The consequences of harmful and underage drinking by college students are more significant, more destructive, and more costly than many parents realize. And these consequences affect students whether they drink or not.

* NIAAA defines binge drinking as a pattern of drinking alcohol that brings blood alcohol concentration (BAC) to 0.08 percent—or 0.08 grams of alcohol per deciliter—or higher. For a typical adult, this pattern corresponds to consuming 5 or more drinks (male), or 4 or more drinks (female), in about 2 hours.

CONSEQUENCES OF DRINKING BY COLLEGE STUDENTS



¹ Methodology for arriving at estimates described in Hingson, R. et al. PMID: 28728636.

² Methodology for arriving at estimates described in Hingson, R. et al. PMID: 15760289.

³ SAMHSA, Center for Behavioral Health Statistics and Quality, 2019 National Survey on Drug Use and Health, Table 6.21B – Types of Illicit Drug, Tobacco Product, and Alcohol Use in Past Month among Persons Aged 18 to 22, by College Enrollment Status and Gender: Percentages, 2018 and 2019. <https://www.samhsa.gov/data/sites/default/files/reports/rpt29394/NSDUHDetailedTabs2019/NSDUHDetTabsSec621b2019.htm#tab6-21b>, Accessed June 30, 2021.

The most recent statistics from the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA) indicate that drinking by college students ages 18 to 24 contributes to an estimated 1,519 student deaths each year.² In addition, there are an estimated 696,000 assaults by students who had been drinking and 97,000 cases of sexual assault or date rape each year.³

Early Weeks Are Critical

Although some students come to college already having some experience with alcohol, certain aspects of college life, such as unstructured time, the widespread availability of alcohol, inconsistent enforcement of underage drinking laws, and limited interactions with parents and other adults, can intensify the problem.

The first 6 weeks of freshman year are a vulnerable time for harmful and underage college drinking and for alcohol-related consequences because of student expectations and social pressures at the start of the academic year. The coronavirus pandemic will create additional stress and uncertainty this fall, so support for students will be critical.

Parents Can Help

An often-overlooked protective factor involves the continuing influence of parents during the college years. Research shows that students who abstain from drinking often do so because their parents discussed alcohol use and its adverse consequences with them. During these crucial early weeks, parents can do a number of things to stay involved.

Parents can help by:

- » Talking with students about the dangers of harmful and underage college drinking—such as the possible legal and school penalties for underage drinking, and the risks of alcohol overdose, unintentional injuries, violence, unsafe sexual behavior, academic failure, and other adverse consequences.
- » Reaching out periodically and keeping the lines of communication open while staying alert for possible alcohol-related problems.
- » Reminding students to feel free to reach out to them to share information about their daily activities and to ask for help if needed.
- » Learning about the school's alcohol prevention and emergency intervention efforts as well as the school's policies and procedures in place this fall for the coronavirus pandemic. (See "Resources Are Available" below.)
- » Making sure students know the signs of alcohol overdose or an alcohol-related problem, and how to help.

Resources Are Available

For parents who want to discuss the consequences of drinking with their college students, a variety of helpful resources are available from NIAAA at <https://www.collegedrinkingprevention.gov>.

These resources include a parents' guide that offers research-based information plus helpful advice on choosing the right college, staying involved during freshman year, and getting assistance if faced with an alcohol-related crisis. The website also provides links to alcohol policies at colleges across the country, an interactive diagram of how alcohol affects the human body, and an interactive alcohol cost calculator.

Additionally, NIAAA's *CollegeAIM*—the *College Alcohol Intervention Matrix*, available at <https://www.collegedrinkingprevention.gov/CollegeAIM>—is a booklet and website that helps schools and parents address harmful and underage student drinking by identifying effective alcohol interventions.

For more information, please visit: <https://www.collegedrinkingprevention.gov/>

¹ SAMHSA, Center for Behavioral Health Statistics and Quality. 2019 National Survey on Drug Use and Health. Table 6.21B—Types of Illicit Drug, Tobacco Product, and Alcohol Use in Past Month among Persons Aged 18 to 22, by College Enrollment Status and Gender: Percentages, 2018 and 2019. <https://www.samhsa.gov/data/sites/default/files/reports/rpt29394/NSDUHDetailedTabs2019/NSDUHDetTabsSect6pe2019.htm#tab6-21b>. Accessed December 8, 2020.

² Methodology for arriving at estimates described in Hingson, R.W.; Zha, W.; and Weitzman, E.R. Magnitude of and trends in alcohol-related mortality and morbidity among U.S. college students ages 18–24, 1998–2005. *Journal of Studies on Alcohol and Drugs* (Suppl. 16):12–20, 2009. PMID: 19538908.

³ Methodology for arriving at estimates described in Hingson, R.; Heeren, T.; Winter, M.; et al. Magnitude of alcohol-related mortality and morbidity among U.S. college students ages 18–24: Changes from 1998 to 2001. *Annual Review of Public Health* 26:259–279, 2005. PMID: 15760289.



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