



Parents and Teens: Questions and Answers

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This brochure is written for parents and caregivers of teens in the 14-18 year old age range. It is meant to address parents' common concerns about teen alcohol and other drug use.

Introduction

Parents and other caregivers often wonder how to handle the tricky questions about teenage drinking and other drug use. Putting the concerns into a Q & A format helps parents zero in on the key issues.

Another challenge that parents face is answering the questions that teens put to them about drinking and drug use. When teens ask questions it is important to answer them directly without getting into a debate about whether a drug is "good" or "bad". Answering their questions provides an opportunity to counter popular myths about drinking and drug use with straight facts and to present your own point of view about substance use – without entering into an argument.

Questions Parents Ask

Q So many teenagers have begun to drink at parties by the middle of high school. How can I prevent my teen from joining in?

A You can't necessarily "prevent" your teen from drinking or other activities! Teens make these decisions when their parents aren't around. We do know that some underage drinking, especially in the older teenage years, is common. Parents can give a clear message to their teenagers about drinking ("I don't want you to drink at this stage of your life because it puts your personal safety at risk") and have a surprising amount of influence. Discuss with your teens what choices they have when they find themselves in a situation where some of their friends may be drinking. If you find that your teen is drinking at parties, you may want to focus on ways that they can increase their safety and responsible decision-making in these situations.

Q What are the dangers of teenage drinking, as long as my teen doesn't drink and drive?

A There are many dangers associated with drinking during the teenage years. Even with just a few drinks, alcohol begins to affect judgment. Drinkers then may make decisions that put their own and others' health and safety at risk. Teenagers themselves readily admit that when they drink they often behave in ways they later regret. This can range from "acting stupid" to saying something rude to a friend or getting involved sexually. Fights, damage to property, injuries, unwanted pregnancy, STDs (sexually transmitted diseases), trying other drugs and riding with an impaired driver are all possible harmful outcomes of teenage drinking. Young drivers who have not been drinking themselves (as "the designated driver") are also at risk if they have drunk passengers. Their ability to drive safely can be seriously challenged in this situation.

Sometimes party drinking takes the form of "chugging" or "funneling" -- power drinking or contests where young people drink as much as they can as quickly as they can. This is particularly risky, because drinking in this manner can cause severe intoxication ("alcohol poisoning") leading to stoppage of breathing and even death. Death can also occur because a person becomes unconscious and chokes on his or her own vomit. Parents need to discuss with their teens about calling for emergency assistance when they find someone in this situation.

Q Isn't it better if teenagers are allowed to drink in their own home, so they don't feel it's something to "get away with"?

A Many parents do feel that if alcohol is not made to be the “forbidden fruit”, it will lose some of its attraction for a teenager. In fact, most young people are introduced to drinking in their own homes. However, there is a clear difference between the underage (but legal) drinking in a family situation (such as at times of celebration or on a religious holiday) and the kind of drinking that underage teenagers do with their friends. This kind of party drinking tends to be unrestrained and is in fact, illegal. Having a parent present in the home when there is a teenage drinking party does not prevent the harmful or legal consequences of underage drinking. Some recent studies have found that adult supervised teen drinking can actually increase the potential for problems with teen drinking.

Q Is the marijuana available today different than the marijuana of the 60’s and 70’s?

A The strength of marijuana has increased – even compared to twenty years ago. Today different varieties of marijuana are being grown across North America, much of it indoors, or “hydroponically”. Using up-to-date growing techniques, marijuana growers are able to cross-cultivate different varieties to create new and unique types of marijuana. Today’s marijuana has a consistently higher level of THC, the “psychoactive” component of marijuana.

Q Is marijuana less harmful than tobacco or alcohol?

A The harmful effects of tobacco use and alcohol abuse on individuals and society are well known. For example, we know that tobacco is the leading cause of preventable lung cancer deaths in Canada. And we are aware that sexual assaults, domestic violence and many traffic injuries and deaths are closely linked to alcohol abuse. Marijuana is not in these categories.

However, marijuana shares some harmful health effects in common with tobacco, such as the cancer-causing agents and damage to the breathing system. Marijuana has similar harmful effects as alcohol, such as impaired judgment, coordination and concentration. Marijuana use also poses risks to work place and traffic safety. Evidence is beginning to show that long-term marijuana use poses a risk for memory and selective attention that nicotine or moderate daily drinking is not associated with.

Q I’ve seen people smoking marijuana as if it is legal. What are the legal consequences if someone is caught with marijuana?

A Changes to the laws affecting marijuana have been proposed over years, but the fact is that marijuana possession is illegal in Canada. It is a criminal offence to export, import, possess, grow, sell, give or traffic marijuana, or to possess marijuana for the purpose of trafficking. While people who are convicted of marijuana possession for the first time could receive a fine or a discharge, they could end up with a criminal record. And having a conviction can lead to future restrictions for a person.

Q What is “harm reduction”? Is this an approach I should take with my teen?

A Harm reduction is the approach that our first priority should be to reduce the problems and harms associated with alcohol and other drug use. An example of this approach would be supporting a Designated Driver initiative. Having a designated driver does not condone alcohol use, but it does allow others to drink more safely. It is based on the knowledge that impaired driving can cause irrevocable damage and that designating a non-drinking driver reduces the risks for the driver, for those who have been drinking and for others on the road.

Many parents who advise their children against drinking and use of any drug will add, as their bottom line, that if their teens do happen to drink or use drugs, they can call their parents to ensure they have a safe way to get home. Parents who do not want their children to use alcohol can still warn their teens to never leave their drink (alcoholic or non-alcoholic) unattended at a party or take a drink from anyone, in order to prevent a drug from being slipped into their drink. Particularly as teens grow older and parents realize that they have begun to drink, parents can discuss with their teens ways to increase their personal safety, for example by having a sober ‘buddy’ around.

There is strong evidence that if teens do choose to drink during their later teen years by limiting the amount they drink on one occasion (for example, one or two drinks at most) they can decrease the associated risks and avoid the harms of being drunk. Parents can discuss this option for increased safety with their teens even if they prefer their teen not to drink at all.

Parents can also make sure that their teenage children have all the facts about tobacco, alcohol, and other drugs, so that when their teens do need to make their own choices about drug use, they can do so based on accurate information. Informed teens will take precautions to decrease the problems that smoking, drinking or drug use can bring. In giving these “harm reduction” messages parents can continue to emphasize to their children that the most certain way to protect their personal safety is to not drink or use any drugs at all.

Questions Teens Ask

Q Wouldn't you rather I drink than take drugs?

A I would rather you did not use any drug, including alcohol. Alcohol is a drug. Drinking can lead to serious problems, especially at this time in your life. If you choose to drink when you are older, I hope you will do so responsibly.

Q What's the big deal! I only drink beer.

A Some people think that beer is not as harmful as other forms of alcohol. But one beer has the same amount of alcohol in it as a drink of liquor or a glass of wine. It's the amount you drink that affects you. You can definitely get drunk on beer.

Q What's the difference if I start to drink now or I wait until I'm 19 - it's only a few years difference?

A The younger you start, the more inexperienced you are in handling the kinds of problems which often come up when kids get together and there is drinking. Situations you hadn't planned for can easily get out of hand. During these times, you need to rely on your own good sense to take care of yourself and maybe even others. If you're drinking, you just can't think through problems the way you can when you are sober.

Q I only drink on weekends so what's the problem?

A Many people think that they won't have problems with alcohol because they only drink on weekends. But many young people who limit their drinking to the weekend tend to “binge” or drink a lot at that time. There are a lot of problems associated with binge drinking, such as alcohol poisoning, fights, damage to property and regrets about sex. I just need to watch the news or read the paper and I see the serious incidents that occur when teens get together and drink. The number of drivers and passengers killed or seriously injured by drinking drivers on weekends is also very upsetting. I don't want these problems to happen to you. I care about you and I want you to be safe.

Q You smoke, so how can you tell me not to use drugs?

A I don't want to smoke, but I made the mistake of trying cigarettes when I was young. I now realize that tobacco is one of the most addictive drugs and can affect my health. The easiest way to quit is not to start.

Q Everyone uses marijuana. I don't see why I can't use it too.

A Actually that's not true. Most young people or adults do not use marijuana or other illegal drugs. In fact, many teens who try marijuana out of curiosity find that they don't like the effects and don't continue using it. Today's stronger forms of marijuana can cause unpleasant sensations. If most of the young people you know use marijuana, you may need to learn what it is like to make a decision that is different from your friends. Your friends should

respect your decision. And you may be surprised that one or two others might follow your example.

Q You drink, so what's the difference if I use marijuana?

A As an adult I have chosen to drink in a way that is safe and responsible for me and the people I care about. I don't feel you can use marijuana in a way that is absolutely safe and healthy. Marijuana affects short-term memory, judgment, co-ordination and driving skills. Recent studies have shown a connection between regular marijuana use and mental health problems and impact on IQ – especially for those who smoke a lot of marijuana during their teen years. Because it is a street drug, you can't be sure exactly what is contained in a joint or how powerful the drug might be.

Q Marijuana is a natural substance so it can't be that harmful.

A Marijuana, like many drugs, does originally come from plants growing in nature. But we know that plants can be dangerous; some can be so poisonous they are deadly. Most drugs which come from plants are changed by a chemical process in some way (like cocaine or heroin). The marijuana you get today has been carefully grown in grow operations using specific techniques to produce exactly what the grower wants and to make the biggest profit for the grower. Not much is left to chance! Growers use pesticides and other chemicals to encourage plant growth and prevent insects and diseases which will damage their crops, and these can be harmful to the user.

Q Doctors give marijuana to people who are sick, so that proves that it's not unhealthy.

A It's true that some people who are seriously ill, for example with AIDs or multiple sclerosis or those who are undergoing cancer treatment find that using marijuana helps their symptoms. The majority of doctors recommend other medicines to control these symptoms because they are concerned about the health risks associated with smoking marijuana. Many drugs, whether originally from a plant or produced only in labs, can have some positive helpful benefits in the right situations. But that does not mean these drugs are meant to be used for personal recreation.

Q I just use marijuana sometimes on weekends with my friends. You know I won't have problems. Why are you worried?

A I have a number of concerns about your marijuana use, even if it is occasional. Each time you use marijuana, it is unpredictable. And many young people don't worry about driving a car after using marijuana even though it affects their ability to judge distances and slows reaction time. So I worry that you will drive or ride with someone who is impaired. My other concern is that it's easy for a teen to begin to use more often and in more situations. And that's when it can begin to interfere with your school work and relationships. But by that time it's hard to recognize that these problems are linked to your use of marijuana. And at that point it will be much harder for you to stop.

Q I got the prescription drugs from our own medicine cabinet. What's the harm in trying them once or twice?

A These drugs were prescribed for me when I had to deal with a great deal of pain. They can be extremely dangerous when they are used by someone else or even if I were to use them in another situation. They can even be life-threatening if they are used in combination with alcohol or another drug. It is my responsibility to dispose of them safely so they are not around for you or anyone else.