**DRINKING ALCOHOL**

*Drinking alcohol is an activity that makes teenagers feel more grown up. Alcohol advertisers typically show drinkers having fun, often in desirable social situations. Alcohol is easily obtained but can be dangerous when used to excess and particularly when driving a car. This tip sheet gives you some suggestions to help you deal with pressures your teenager may experience to use alcohol to excess.*

**HOW COMMON IS TEENAGE DRINKING?**

Teenage drinking is common. More than three-quarters of 12 year olds and 90% of 14 year olds report that they have already had a drink of alcohol. About one in five teenagers aged between 13 and 17 report regularly having more than five drinks in a row. Health problems associated with alcohol mainly relate to its excessive use. However, alcohol use is also related to unsafe sex, violence and car accidents.

**WHY DO TEENAGERS DRINK ALCOHOL?**

Drinking alcohol is attractive to teenagers for a number of different reasons. Alcohol is generally regarded as a socially acceptable drug that is legally approved for use after a person reaches their late teens. Drinking alcohol is therefore seen as an adult activity.

**HOW TO PREVENT YOUR TEENAGER DRINKING TO EXCESS?**

Although some people believe that alcohol should be illegal, most people think that alcohol has many benefits if used responsibly. There are also different views on whether parents should aim to delay teenagers starting to drink altogether until they are of legal age or to help them learn to drink alcohol responsibly. The main risks occur when teenagers are in situations where they drink more than they should. Teaching teenagers how to use alcohol responsibly is seen increasingly as more useful than trying to stop them drinking at all. However, even this can be a problem because after drinking a certain amount of alcohol, it becomes more difficult for teenagers to make good decisions.

* **Educate your teenager about the risks**

Obtain information about the effects of alcohol on the body and how to work out what a standard drink is. These are available from health centres, some schools and your family doctor. Here is a brief outline of some basic points.

Explain to your teenager what a standard drink is:

* A nip of spirits is 1 standard drink
* A bottle of wine usually contains 7.5 standard drinks
* A can of full strength beer is about 1.5 standard drinks

Explain what are considered to be low risk drinking levels:

* For males: 4 or less standard drinks *per day*
* For females: 2 or less standard drinks *per day*

Explain how much alcohol can be drunk to keep a blood alcohol concentration below 0.05:

* For males: 2 standard drinks in the first hour, and 1 standard drink each hour after than
* For females: 1 standard drink in the first hour, and 1 standard drink each hour after that

The blood alcohol concentration will vary from person to person. However, drinking on an empty stomach will result in someone becoming drunk more quickly.

Here are some of the risks of drinking alcohol to excess:

* Alcohol use is strongly linked to motor vehicle accidents which are a leading cause of death for adolescents
* Drinking excessively can increase the risk of sexual activity, violence, depression and suicide. It is also likely to have a negative impact on school performance

Teenagers can avoid drinking to excess in a number of ways. Here are a few suggestions:

* When thirsty, drink water or non-alcoholic drinks first
* Drink water or a non-alcoholic drink in between alcoholic drinks
* Keep track of how many standard drinks you have. Avoid topping up after drinking half a glass as this makes it more difficult to keep count
* Set a limit before you start to drink and stick to it. If with a friend make an agreement together
* Space your drinks out to avoid reaching your limit too early at a party or social event
* Avoid emptying a bottle just to finish it off
* Pay attention to how you feel and stop when you have had enough to drink
* **Help your teenager rehearse their plan to resist peer pressure to drink to excess**

Your teenager may report they are often pressured by peers to drink. They may be worried that they will lose these friends if they do not join in. They will need to have a plan about what to say that allows them to avoid pressure to drink excessively but does not result in being rejected by their friends.

* *Health and Fitness*: Your teenager could plan to say they are at risk for diabetes or liver disease. Or they may plan to say they want to begin training for a sport or activity that excessive drinking would affect
* *Expense*: Your teenager may plan to say they cannot afford to buy alcohol anymore and do not want to keep borrowing from their friends; or that they are saving up for something that their peers would approve of, such as a motorcycle, a music concert, or clothes. They might also plan to say they don’t want to give their money to the large alcohol companies, but prefer to spend in on other things
* *Addiction*: Your teenager might plan to say they don’t want to become addicted to alcohol because they don’t want to be controlled by the craving for it. They might also say that if they are addicted, they will not be able to have good relationships with members of the opposite sex
* **Help your teenager rehearse their plan to resist peer pressure to drink to excess**

Once your teenager has decided what to say when they are pressured to drink more than they should, get them to practice with you. Pick a time when there is no one else around and you are not likely to be disturbed. Ask your teenager to describe a situation that is likely to occur in the near future, or a situation that has happened recently. Get them to describe the place, the time and the person/s involved so you have a clear picture.

**WHAT TO DO IF YOUR TEENAGER IS ALREADY DRINKING TO EXCESS**

If your teenager finds it difficult to resist the pressure to drink a lot, even after you have helped them rehearse a plan like the one described above, you may need to provide some extra motivation.

* **Set up a behaviour contract**

Your teenager may say they want to cut down their drinking but are finding it difficult to stick with their decision. Setting up a behaviour contract can help. Follow these steps:

* ***Step 1*** – Work out a way to help your teenager monitor their drinking. A simple way is to just count the number of standard drinks they had. The do not have to get an exact count as long as it is close
* ***Step 2*** – Decide on a reward or privilege that you will provide for your teenager if they cut down their drinking. It is very important to select rewards and privileges that you have control over. Rewards also need to be important to your teenager. The contract will not work if your teenager can get access to what they want without you. It will also not work if it is not something they really want
* ***Step 3*** – Decide what reductions in your teenagers drinking will earn what reward or privilege

Discuss what would be an improvement on the current situation and aim for that at first. Aim to reduce your teenagers drinking gradually. For example, if your teenager is currently drinking the equivalent of 10 standard drinks when they go out at night, set the goal at say 8 standard drinks a night. Provide the reward as soon as your teenager meets this goal. Then after a week or two, lower the goal to perhaps 5 or 6 standard drinks. By gradually changing the goal you can bring about a major reduction over several weeks. However, do not expect smooth progress. There may be some weeks when your teenagers drinking suddenly goes back up. If this happens, do not become angry or give up. Find out what may have caused this and problem solve how to stop it happening again. You may need to go back and practice the plan to resist peer pressure described earlier in this tip sheet.

* **Discuss how to prevent and deal with relapse**

If your teenager is able to reduce their problem drinking, praise them and tell them how well they have done. The next challenge is to prevent them slipping back into old habits. To help your teenager avoid this trap, use the following strategy:

* Discuss with your teenager the high risk times or situations when the temptation to drink to excess might be higher than usual. This might be at a party or in a club with friends. Use the routine for dealing with risky behaviour to work out a plan. Knowing what to do when your teenager is in a high-risk situation will help them stick to their decision not to drink too much. Some teenagers may just have to avoid certain friends and situations to be sure of not drinking heavily again. Use your behaviour contract to reward them for keeping to their plan. You may even wish to consider a consequence for not following the plan and starting to drink heavily again
* If your teenager does give in to temptation and starts drinking heavily again, do not become angry or give up. Treat it as a setback that can be dealt with. Go back to the behaviour contract and look at the rewards you are using. Perhaps they are not powerful enough. Or perhaps they have lost their appeal and some new ones are needed. Also, go back to your routine for dealing with risky behaviour and see if you can improve the part of the plan that did not work

Reducing alcohol use can be difficult, especially if your teenager has become used to regular sessions with their friends. Provide as much support and encouragement as you can. But do not feel that you have failed if your plan is not successful. You may need to try again at another time. Or you may decide to seek professional advice.

**WHAT TO DO IF YOUR TEENAGER IS ALREADY DRINKING TO EXCESS AND IS NOT WILLING TO CHANGE**

If you teenager does not accept your reasons for reducing their alcohol use, you may need to look for a stronger way to get this message across. Here are some suggestions:

* Find someone who has a long-term problem with alcohol and ask them to talk to your teenager about how it has affected their life
* Get your teenager to calculate the cost of their drinking over a year. Explain how much they will need to earn to buy alcohol, and what they could buy with that money if they weren’t drinking so much
* Show them newspaper cuttings about the health effects of excessive alcohol use
* Find someone who has lost their driving licence as a result of driving while drunk. Ask them to described how it has affected their life

**POINTS TO REMEMBER**

If you have tried setting up a behaviour contract to help your teenager reduce excessive drinking but it did not work, you may need to seek professional assistance. If your teenager is already drinking to excess, and none of the strategies suggested have appeared to work, seek professional advice.

**KEY STEPS**

* Educate your teenager about the risks
* Develop a plan to help your teenager resist peer pressure
* Help your teenager rehearse their plan to resist peer pressure
* Hold a follow-up review session
* Set up a behaviour contract
* Discuss how to prevent and deal with relapse