

BINGE DRINKING IN ADOLESCENTS AND COLLEGE STUDENTS

DID YOU KNOW?

- Frequent binge drinkers were eight times more likely than non-binge drinkers to miss a class, fall behind in schoolwork, get hurt or injured, and damage property.¹³
- Nearly one out of every five teenagers (16 percent) has experienced “black out” spells where they could not remember what happened the previous evening because of heavy or binge drinking.¹⁴
- More than 60 percent of college men and almost 50 percent of college women who are frequent binge drinkers report that they drink and drive.¹⁵
- Binge drinking during high school, especially among males, is strongly predictive of binge drinking in college.¹⁶
- Binge drinking during college may be associated with mental health disorders such as compulsiveness, depression or anxiety, or early deviant behavior.¹⁷
- In a national study, 91 percent of women and 78 percent of the men who were frequent binge drinkers considered themselves to be moderate or light drinkers.¹⁸

Despite laws in every State that make it illegal for anyone under the age of 21 to purchase or possess alcohol, young people report that alcohol is easy to obtain and that many high school and college students drink with one goal—to get drunk.¹ Binge drinking is defined as consuming five or more drinks in a row for boys and four or more in a row for girls.²

PREVALENCE OF BINGE DRINKING

- Binge drinking, often beginning around age 13, tends to increase during adolescence, peak in young adulthood (ages 18 to 22), then gradually decrease.³
- Binge drinking during the past 30 days was reported by 8 percent of youth ages 12 to 17 and 30 percent of those ages 18 to 20.⁴
- Among persons under the legal drinking age (12 to 20), 15 percent were binge drinkers and 7 percent were heavy drinkers.⁵

Highlights of SAMHSA's 1998 National Household Survey on Drug Abuse⁶ include:

- About 10.4 million adolescents ages 12 to 20 reported using alcohol. Of those, 5.1 million were binge drinkers and included 2.3 million heavy drinkers who binged at least five times a month.
- Nearly 9 percent of boys and 7 percent of girls ages 12 to 17 reported binge drinking in the previous month.
- White non-Hispanic youth ages 12 to 17 reported the highest frequency of binge drinking (9 percent) as compared with 6 percent of Hispanic and 3 percent of black non-Hispanic youth.
- Binge drinking among youth ages 12 to 17 appears to occur most frequently in the North Central region of the United States and in metropolitan areas.

BINGE DRINKING ON COLLEGE CAMPUSES

- According to a 1997 national study conducted by the Harvard School of Public Health, nearly half of all college students surveyed drank four or five drinks in one sitting within the previous 2 weeks.⁷
- Students who live in a fraternity or sorority house are the heaviest drinkers—86 percent of fraternity residents and 80 percent of sorority residents report binge drinking.⁸

- In a recent study, 39 percent of college women binge drank within a 2-week period compared with 50 percent of college men.⁹
- Colleges with high binge drinking rates were also much more likely to attract students who were binge drinkers in high school.¹⁰
- In one multicampus survey, white non-Hispanic students reported the highest percentage of binge drinking in a 2-week period (43.8 percent), followed by Native American (40.6 percent), Hispanic (31.3 percent), Asian (22.7 percent), and black non-Hispanic (22.5 percent) students. This pattern of binge drinking differences among ethnic groups is also seen in high school students.¹¹

CONSEQUENCES OF BINGE DRINKING¹²

Alcohol poisoning—a severe and potentially fatal physical reaction to an alcohol overdose—is the most serious consequence of binge drinking. When excessive amounts of alcohol are consumed, the brain is deprived of oxygen. The struggle to deal with an overdose of alcohol and lack of oxygen will eventually cause the brain to shut down the voluntary functions that regulate breathing and heart rate.

If a person is known to have consumed large quantities of alcohol in a short period of time, symptoms of alcohol poisoning include:

- vomiting
- unconsciousness
- cold, clammy, pale or bluish skin
- slow or irregular breathing (less than 8 breaths a minute or 10 or more seconds between breaths).

SECONDARY EFFECTS OF BINGE DRINKING

- In schools with high binge drinking rates, 34 percent of non-binge drinkers reported being insulted or humiliated by binge drinkers; 13 percent reported being pushed, hit, or assaulted; 54 percent reported having to take care of a drunken student; 68 percent were interrupted while studying; and 26 percent of women experienced an unwanted sexual advance.¹⁹

SOURCES

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- ³ National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, Youth Drinking: Risk Factors and Consequences, Alcohol Alert No. 37, Bethesda, MD: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1995.
- ⁴ National Institute on Drug Abuse, National Survey Results on Drug Use from The Monitoring the Future Study, 1975-1997, Volume I: Secondary School Students, Rockville, MD: Department of Health and Human Services, 1998.
- ⁵ Ibid.
- ⁶ Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, Summary of Findings from the 1998 National Household Survey on Drug Abuse, Rockville, MD: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, DHHS Pub. No. 98-3251, 1999.
- ⁷ Wechsler, Henry, Dowdall, George, Maenner, Gretchen, Gledhill-Hoyt, Jeana, and Hang Lee, Changes in binge drinking and related problems among American college students between 1993 and 1997: Results of the Harvard School of Public Health College Alcohol Study, Journal of American College Health, Volume 47, 1998.
- ⁸ Erenberg, Debra, Hacker, George, Problem? What Problem? Some basic facts about the drinking culture, in Last Call for High-Risk Bar Promotions That Target College Students: A Community Action Guide, 1997.
- ⁹ Lyall, Katherine, Binge Drinking in College: A Definitive Study, in Binge Drinking on American College Campuses: A New Look at an Old Problem, August 1995, a report supported by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, 1995.
- ¹⁰ Ibid.
- ¹¹ National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, College Students and Drinking, Alcohol Alert No. 29, Bethesda, MD: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1995.
- ¹² American Academy of Pediatrics, Binge Drinking, Washington, D.C.: 1999.
- ¹³ Wechsler, Henry, Dowdall, George, Maenner, Gretchen, Gledhill-Hoyt, Jeana, and Hang Lee, Changes in binge drinking and related problems among American college students between 1993 and 1997: Results of the Harvard School of Public Health College Alcohol Study, Journal of American College Health, Volume 47, 1998.
- ¹⁴ American Academy of Pediatrics, AAP Releases New Findings on Teens and Underage Drinking, Washington, D.C., 1998.
- ¹⁵ National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, College Students and Drinking, Alcohol Alert No. 29, Bethesda, MD: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1995.
- ¹⁶ Ibid.
- ¹⁷ Ibid.
- ¹⁸ Lyall, Katherine, Binge Drinking in College: A Definitive Study, in Binge Drinking on American College Campuses: A New Look at an Old Problem, August 1995, a report supported by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, 1995.
- ¹⁹ Ibid.

SAMHSA, a public health agency in the Department of Health and Human Services, is the Federal Government's lead agency for improving the quality and availability of substance abuse prevention, addiction treatment, and mental health services in the United States. Further information about SAMHSA is available on the Internet at www.samhsa.gov.