

# Under the Influence

## FINDINGS ON ALCOHOL USE AMONG ARLINGTON TEENS

From the March 2007  
Youth Risk Behavior Survey

*The choices that young people make today have a big impact on their health and well-being, now and in the future.*

*The Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) asks young people about those behaviors and habits with the strongest link to their health.*

*This brochure looks at data on teen alcohol use from Arlington's March 2007 survey of middle and high school students. The data suggest that use and over-use of alcohol are far too common among young people in Arlington.*

*Nobody is too young (or too old) to have trouble with booze.*  
Alcoholics Anonymous

### WHY WORRY?

Some adults still dismiss teen alcohol use as a harmless rite of passage. But the science is clear – alcohol is a powerful drug that affects body, brain, and self-control. Its effects are especially damaging to developing adolescent bodies and brains.

Drinking alcohol leads to

- Slower reflexes, loss of coordination, distorted vision, and memory lapses;
- Poor judgment and bad choices;
- Damage to brain, liver and other organs.

Drinking a lot at one time or very quickly can cause alcohol poisoning, which can lead to coma or death. Mixing alcohol with *any other* drug (even common, over-the-counter drugs) can also be lethal. And drinking and driving is still a leading cause of death among teens.

### TEEN BRAIN DEVELOPMENT

Recent research shows one of the most important times for brain development is between the ages of 10 and 20. Because adolescent brains are still developing, alcohol affects teens differently than adults. Teens are at greater risk for addiction and teen alcohol use can affect how a teen learns and uses information. Teen alcohol use can also lower verbal and motor skills. Developing brains and alcohol are a bad mix!

## EARLY USE IS RISKY

As with other drugs, the earlier that use begins, the greater the risk that a young person develops a serious problem with alcohol. Among Arlington 10<sup>th</sup> graders, about *one in five* reported that they began drinking before the age of 13, which places them in the *high risk* category. Use of alcohol can also short-circuit emotional maturity, social skills, and self-confidence – important developmental tasks crucial to healthy development.

## USE OF ALCOHOL

- In 2007, 44 percent of young people surveyed had tried alcohol at least once. Just over one-fourth had used alcohol in the past month.
- Among *high school students*, 68 percent had tried alcohol; 45 percent had used alcohol in the past month; and 28 percent had engaged in binge drinking.
- Girls were just as likely as boys to report alcohol use, although boys were more likely to binge drink.

## DRINKING AND DRIVING

Despite many messages about the dangers of drinking and driving, nine percent of 10<sup>th</sup> grade students reported that in the previous *month* they had driven a car after drinking alcohol and over one-fourth reported riding with a driver who had been drinking. Among 12<sup>th</sup> grade students, 17 percent reported that in the previous *month* they had driven a car after drinking and nearly one-third reported riding with a driver who had been using alcohol.

## CHANGES SINCE 2004

Since 2004, current use of alcohol (defined as in the past month) has fallen from 31 to 26 percent. Most of the decrease was among middle school students. Drinking increased for 12<sup>th</sup> grade students.

## BELIEFS ABOUT ALCOHOL

Teen use of alcohol is influenced by how easily young people can get alcohol, what they think about the risks of drinking, and their beliefs about alcohol use by their peers. Among Arlington youth:

- Forty percent of young people agreed that alcohol is easy to get. This figure increases from 15 percent of 6<sup>th</sup> graders to 61 percent of 12<sup>th</sup> grade students.
- Over half of youth agreed that drinking once a month can cause physical harm and/or problems with family or school.
- Only one percent of youth in 6<sup>th</sup> grade believe that most or all of their peers are using alcohol, down from 6 percent in 2004.

### HOW WE DID THE SURVEY

These findings are based on a survey of about 2500 students enrolled in grades six, eight, ten and twelve in Arlington Public Schools. Participation was voluntary and anonymous. Parents had an opportunity to opt out their children. Less than two percent did. Eighty-six percent of students in the classes chosen for the survey filled one out. Most of those who did not were absent from school. Each question on alcohol specifically excluded a sip of wine for religious purposes.

## WHAT PARENTS CAN DO

*Take a stand:* Be clear that teen alcohol use is not acceptable. Do not serve alcohol to anyone under 21.

*Talk, talk, talk:* Parents and other influential adults need to talk to teens about alcohol on a regular basis. Ask your teen what he or she knows about alcohol and what he or she thinks about teen drinking. Listen carefully without interrupting. Help him or her practice refusing alcohol.

*Model moderate drinking:* According to the Dietary Guidelines for Americans (from the U.S. Departments of Health and Human Services and Agriculture), drinking in moderation means no more than one drink per day for women and no more than two per day for men.

*Monitor:* Know where your teen is. Get to know their friends and the parents of those friends. Be awake when your child comes home.

*Get the facts:* Make sure your teen knows:

- Alcohol is a powerful drug that slows down mind and body, especially in adolescence.
- People, especially teens, tend to be very bad at judging how seriously alcohol has harmed their vision, clouded their thinking, and slowed their reaction time.
- Alcohol use is associated with many dangerous situations for teens including delinquency, fighting, and being a victim of date rape.
- If there is a family history of alcoholism, your teen may be at greater risk for developing a drinking problem.

## FOR MORE INFORMATION

### **On alcohol use and alcoholism:**

**READY Coalition** - Arlington Community effort to reduce teen use of alcohol and other drugs. For more information, contact Ben Harris at [bharris@arlingtonva.us](mailto:bharris@arlingtonva.us)

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention at [www.cdc.gov/HealthyYouth](http://www.cdc.gov/HealthyYouth)

National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism at [www.niaaa.nih.gov](http://www.niaaa.nih.gov)

Alcoholics Anonymous, A Message to Teenagers at [www.alcoholics-anonymous.org](http://www.alcoholics-anonymous.org)

### **On the YRBS data for Arlington:**

Contact Amy Graham, Data Coordinator at 703-228-1668 or [agraha@arlingtonva.us](mailto:agraha@arlingtonva.us).



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