

Teen Vogue

Everything You Need To Know About Drinking in College

Alcohol can be riskier than you think.



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James Wojcik/Teen Vogue

Earlier this week we told you about the dangerous effects that alcohol and binge drinking can have on your brain. Today we're going to go a little deeper into the realities of drinking in college — something you're undoubtedly going to encounter, and should be well informed about. *(Note: Teen Vogue does not condone underage drinking, but we're also not oblivious to the realities of life on a U.S. campus.)*

College is where you figure out what you want to do with your life, hone your skills within your major, and decide who you want to be as a person; it's a cliché, but it's true. It's also where a lot of kids start drinking alcohol. At some point in college, you're probably going to encounter that ominous Red Solo Cup, whether at a frat party, a friend's apartment, or a bar. *If you drink — and how much you drink — is totally up to you. Unless you choose to abstain from alcohol entirely, drinking might be a normal part of your college experience. But what's important is that you stay safe and avoid *high-risk* drinking.*

What is high-risk drinking, exactly? According to the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, binge-drinking occurs when a woman consumes four or more drinks over two hours, or a man consumes five or more (it's not sexist, they're just usually bigger). Not only is binge-drinking dangerous because of an increased risk of alcohol poisoning, but it also causes a lot of accidents. Each year, 1,825 college students die from unintentional alcohol-related injuries, including car crashes, falls, and firearms incidents. There are an estimated 97,000 sexual assaults resulting from alcohol abuse. Additionally, 25% of students' academic performance is affected by their drinking.

The problem is not that colleges are full of alcoholics. “There is a very small minority of college students who qualify for an alcohol-dependent diagnosis. The bulk of alcohol-related issues are caused by people who occasionally binge-drink,” explains Dr. David Jernigan, the Director of the Center on Alcohol Marketing and Youth at the Johns Hopkins School of Public Health. In fact, binge-drinking is decreasing overall. Only 40% of students have engaged in it in the past month, down from 45% in 2006. But there has been an increase in the number of students getting hospitalized for it.

“Those who are doing it are going to extreme levels, and that makes it look like the problem is getting worse, when in fact it is getting better,” says Dr. Aaron White, the Senior Scientific Advisor to the Director of the NIAA. That sector of the population who continues to binge-drink in college is often the group that was binge-drinking in high school. Studies show the earlier students start drinking, the more likely they are to binge-drink in college. “The young people who come from homes where parents had a liberal attitude towards drinking are much more likely to drink heavily in college,” says Dr. Jernigan.

At the same time, there are also first-time drinkers in college who don't know how to drink responsibly. Dr. White explains that a lot of accidental binge-drinking comes from a lack of information. He says that if you do decide to drink in college, there are five things you can do to stay safe and minimize any long term damage:

1. Understand what a “drink” is — a lot of accidental binge drinking comes from a lack of understanding this. A “drink” is 12 oz. of beer, 5 oz. of wine, or 1.5 oz. of liquor (like whiskey or vodka).
2. Have a plan at the beginning of the night, and set a limit for yourself so you don't drink too much.
3. Pace yourself. Space your drinks evenly so you don't accidentally drink too much, *too quickly*. The quicker you consume alcohol, the more it will affect you.
4. Know *what* you're drinking. The problem with frat party mixed drinks is that you never know how much alcohol is in one Red Solo Cup. In 12 oz. of liquid, there could be anywhere from 1.5 oz. to 12 oz. of alcohol. You also don't know if the drink has been drugged. As a rule of thumb, it's always safer to drink from a sealed bottle or can that you open yourself.
5. Have food in your stomach, alternate alcoholic and non-alcoholic beverages, continue to eat as you drink by diluting the alcohol with water and soaking it up with carbohydrates, you prevent it from getting absorbed by the body, and by extension, the brain.

Speaking of the brain, there are three main parts affected by alcohol. According to Dr. White, “The amygdala is the part of the brain that lets you know when you are in danger, and alcohol muffles it. After just a couple of drinks, alcohol also suppresses the frontal lobes, which allow you to think about the future, make good choices and most importantly, control your urges.” This is how alcohol impedes judgment.

“Keep drinking, and the alcohol affects the hippocampus, which is where your memories are made, and particularly if you drink fast, the hippocampus can get shut down, causing you to black out.” In other words, you'll wake up the next morning without any memory of the night before, and find out you probably made some bad decisions. After you black out, that's when things get really dangerous, because then the alcohol affects your reflexes, like the ones that

keep you breathing, keep your heart beating, and make you gag if there's something blocking your airway.

Everyone has a different approach when it comes to drinking in college, and regardless of whether you occasionally indulge or are always totally sober, the important thing is that you stay safe and make wise decisions.