

Binge Drinking in College Students: What parents need to know

Dr. Dave, a friend of Dr. Kardos, is a physician in a Student Health Center at a respectable college in a large city. Here is an alarming, yet typical, scenario involving binge drinking that Dr. Dave encounters on a too-frequent basis.

A 19 year old young man comes in to the Student Health Center very concerned because he had woken up that morning in an apartment in bed with a woman he did not know. He had been out with friends drinking at a bar (a frequent occurrence), vaguely recalls meeting a woman, but had so much to drink that he cannot even recall leaving the bar, let alone what happened afterward. His greatest concern is that he has no idea if he used a condom (he left before she woke up), and thus could have been exposed to HIV and other sexually transmitted infections.

Ironically, this student is worried about exposure to sexually transmitted diseases but not about the root of his problem: binge drinking. In other words, he is worried about sexually transmitted diseases but not about his drinking which caused his potential exposure to dangerous diseases.

Here is what Dr. Dave, a career student health doctor, wants parents of college students to know about binge drinking in college students:

Although alcohol use is often considered a rite of passage for college students, it is also one of the major health risks for this age group. Alcohol-related health problems can present in a variety of ways and do not have to involve any signs of dependency. Among college-aged students, the most common manifestation of alcohol abuse comes from the consequences of binge drinking.

The National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA) reports the following **sobering** statistics regarding **annual health risks directly attributed to alcohol use among college students** between the ages of 18 and 24. These statistics also serve as an important reminder that a

person does not have to be drinking to be adversely affected by alcohol abuse.

- 1,400 student deaths from alcohol-related unintentional injuries (including motor vehicle accidents)
- 500,000 unintentional student injuries
- More than 600,000 cases of student-on-student assault
- More than 70,000 cases of sexual assault or date rape
- 400,000 students having unprotected sex and more than 100,000 students too intoxicated to remember if sex was consensual.

The first 6 weeks of the first semester of college is an important predictor of first year academic performance and is an important window period to monitor for any significant changes in a new student's behavior and lifestyle habits. Parents can help by being aware of these issues and by being open to speaking with their children about the potential risks of alcohol use both before and during the college experience. A simple rule of thumb for parents is to **stay involved**, while still allowing their children the space necessary for learning, exploring, and maturing into adulthood.

If your child begins to exhibit unusual behavior, such as lower grades, mood changes, or a new unwillingness to talk to you, this behavior should prompt you to find out more.

Additional information is available at <http://www.collegedrinkingprevention.gov/>.

Dr. Dave, MD is a physician who has been working in college health since 2000.