

## **Teenagers and alcohol use... what is happening?**

Alcohol has been used by men in all types of societies and will certainly continue to be used. Most people use it in a sensible way, most of the times. The majority agree that the problem lies in its misuse, especially amongst younger generations.

Alcoholism, which could be explained as the extreme end of a spectrum of use is believed to run in families, and scientific studies indicate that genetics play a role in a person's risk of developing such a condition. However, research also shows that an individual's environment and peer influences also affect the risk of becoming alcoholic.

A European Study, which was conducted in 2003, showed that Malta ranks fifth among 35 participating countries in the number of 16-year old students who reported bingeing 3 times or more during the previous 30 days. Only 6.4% of the 16-year old Maltese respondents in the ESPAD did not drink alcohol at least once in their lives. (The European School Survey Project on Alcohol & Other Drugs, ESPAD, 2003).

Even though it is erroneous to equate binge drinking with alcoholism, binge drinking may cause a lot of harm and could be dangerous too.

Even though it is legal for people over 16 to consume alcohol, it could be considered as a harmful and dangerous drug. The public perception, especially amongst young people is that "everyone" drinks - even that "everyone" drinks a lot. Nevertheless, it is pertinent to mention that there are people who do not drink at all, and the vast majority of people drink responsibly.

Binge drinking is irresponsible, heavy drinking that often comes under the guise of "having fun". Binge drinking is dangerous to the drinker and to people around him or her. Binge drinkers drink "to get drunk." The goal is to lose control. Typically, persons who binge

- Drink large quantities within a short span of time;
- Drink quickly;
- May do foolish and dangerous things like driving drunk, starting fights, and taking unnecessary risks of all kinds whilst under the influence of alcohol.

## **What are the short-term effects of binge drinking?**

Each instance of binge drinking can cause hangovers resulting in headaches, intense thirst, nausea, vomiting, extreme sensitivity to light and noise, blurred vision, shakiness, and exhaustion. When someone binges on alcohol, the person loses the ability to make good decisions. Some other consequences are the following:

- Loss of consciousness;
- Falling or running into things, causing injury or death;
- Unplanned and/or unsafe sexual activity;
- Increased risk of sexual assault;
- Getting into trouble with authorities;
- Damaging property;
- Behaving aggressively and getting into fights;
- Alcohol poisoning - nausea and/or vomiting; can progress to unconsciousness, coma, or death;

- Respiratory arrest;
- Choking to death on vomit;
- Sudden death from stroke;
- Increased risk of drowning;
- Loss of reasoning ability, movement control, and reaction speed - all of which make you deadly behind the wheel of a car.

It is also relevant to know that alcohol abuse caused by binge drinking lasts beyond the actual drunkenness. It could take as long as twelve hours after you "sober up" to regain your normal reasoning ability and reaction speed – and to have a legal amount of alcohol in your blood for driving purposes.

### **What are the long-term health consequences of using alcohol?**

Even though long-term health consequences might be considered as something remote for young people, however they are worth a short mention as they are still real. Some of these consequences are the following;

- Birth Defects;
- Liver Damage;
- Heart Disease;
- Bone Damage;
- Cancer;
- Brain Damage.

### **Binge drinking and risky sexual behaviour**

Binge drinking brings with it other true-life consequences, which can have adverse effects on teenagers. The first thing that comes to mind is teenage pregnancy. From the Maltese perspective, it seems that this is an issue which is present in schools and is thus the cause of some serious problems.

Studies and reports, both locally and abroad suggest that when young people have been drinking they are less likely to use contraception. Young people say alcohol is the main reason why they had sex, especially early sex or sex with someone they had not known for long. Studies suggest that alcohol is often involved in teenage pregnancy and can continue to be part of a pregnant teenage mother's life.

However, few studies have examined the direct links between alcohol and pregnancy. Most have looked more generally at the links between alcohol and risky sexual encounters. Although the reasons for teenage pregnancy are multifaceted, alcohol can be one of various contributing factors. The relationship between alcohol and risky sex is complex both for adults and for young people. On one hand, alcohol is perceived as enhancing sexual behaviour while on the other hand it can be associated with sex that is abusive, exploitative or even violent such as rape.

In spite of the fact that popular opinion tends to believe otherwise, what has been said above has been scientifically proven and is definitely not a myth! (Source: *Fact Sheet: Sobering Facts on Alcohol and Teen Pregnancy*) In today's life style where many

teenagers go out on weekends to have fun it is rather uncommon for them not to consume any alcoholic drinks. This might be partly attributed to peer pressure. A walk around Paceville, M'Scala, Bugibba and other popular party venues will surely lead to raised eyebrows, where people staggering through the streets and exhibiting other types of anti-social behaviour is a common sight. Although the majority of people do know their drinking limits however, with some this is not the case. Moreover, as far as binge drinking is concerned, just ask any of the young people who frequent the local nightlife scene, particularly on weekends, how they are planning to spend a night out and a sizeable majority would respond, "Let's go and get wasted".

### **Parents' role**

Whilst parent-child conversations about drinking are essential, talking is not enough. One also needs to take some concrete action to help adolescents to manage their alcohol consumption or, ideally, resist alcohol altogether. Research strongly shows that active, supportive involvement by parents and guardians can help teens avoid underage drinking and prevent later alcohol misuse. Some teens need help and supervision from their parents. This could be done in different ways.

### **Tips for Parents:**

The American 'National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism' suggested the following guidelines:

- If parents keep alcohol in their home, they should keep track of the supply. When possible, encourage teenagers to invite friends over when either parent is at home.
- Parents should seek support from other parents because this helps in getting to know how other parents deal with their teenagers. By joining a support group, parents are likely to find out that they are not the only ones who want to minimize teen alcohol use; many other parents share this concern.
- Parents should be aware of their teens' plans and whereabouts. Generally, adolescents would be more open with those parents who show a good element of trust.
- Never support teen drinking. Parents' attitudes and behaviour towards teen drinking also influence adolescents. One should help the adolescents to build healthy friendships. If one of the parents knows that his or her child is in company of a friend who uses alcohol, the possibility for the child of drinking alcohol is much higher.
- Encourage adolescents to develop friendships with friends who do not drink and who are otherwise having healthy influences on your child. In addition, parents must talk directly with their teen kids about the qualities in a friend that really count, such as trustworthiness and kindness, rather than popularity or a "cool" style.

- When parents disapprove of the child's friends, they should try pointing out their reservations about the friend in a caring, supportive way.
- Finally yet vital, it is important to encourage healthy alternatives to alcohol. Adolescents sometimes drink to beat boredom or because of peer pressure. Encourage them to participate in youth activities that are challenging and fun.

Adolescence in itself is a challenging and vulnerable phase in one's life. Typically, these young persons need to take a number of decisions, which could ultimately affect the rest of their lives. The support of parents during this period is vital. The misuse of alcohol during this period may further complicate their life and jeopardize healthy living.

### **References**

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