

Know! The Link Between Alcohol And Sexual Assault

Alcohol is NEVER an acceptable excuse for sexual assault. Alcohol is, however, the substance used most frequently to assist in sexual assault. The connection between the two is complex.

A false assumption exists that when alcohol is involved in a sexual assault, it somehow lessens the crime—as if the perpetrator is somehow less responsible for his or her actions if he or she had been drinking, and the victim is somehow more responsible if he or she had been drinking. This is wrong. There is zero evidence showing that drinking causes a person to commit such an act. There is research however, to show that alcohol is used to target victims and then used by perpetrators as an excuse for their actions.

Alcohol is our nation's number one health problem among both youth and adults. By the age of 15, about one in three teens will have had at least one alcoholic drink, and by 18 more than half of all teens will have experimented with alcohol. Research proves time and again that when drinking begins at younger ages, those youth are more likely to have problems with drinking later in life.

In previous Know! Tips, it has been discussed that alcohol is responsible for a number of negative physical and mental health consequences, can harm relationships, and leads to problems in school and work. However, it does not hold up as a defense for criminal behavior – no blame for the assault should be put on the survivor, regardless of whether they drank prior to the assault.

Alcohol isn't responsible for a person's choices, but it does play a role in poor decision making, including criminal behavior. The link between alcohol and sexual assault is clear. Because of this, we need to discuss that link when we talk to our kids about alcohol.

Key stats to KNOW! when discussing alcohol, sexual assault, and the connection between them:

- 1 in 4 girls will become a victim of sexual assault in their lifetimes.
- Between 75-85% of sexual assault victims know their assailant—they are not strangers.
- 18% of girls and 3% of boys will become victims of a sexual assault or abuse at the hands of another adolescent by the time they turn 17.
- Half of all sexual assaults involve alcohol—consumed by the victim, the perpetrator, or both.
- 1 in 10 high school drinkers and 1 in 8 high school binge drinkers report being physically forced to have sexual intercourse.

Research conducted by the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism shows that while there is not a direct cause and effect, alcohol may contribute to sexual assault through multiple pathways. Alcohol use by a potential assailant can lead to increased aggressive behavior and a decreased ability or concern when interpreting a female's (or male's) sexual interest accurately. Females who had been drinking when an assault took place reported that their intoxication caused them to take risks that they would normally avoid and made it more difficult for them to resist an assault or sexual advance.

The impact of sexual assault during adolescence can be severe and long-lasting. Victims are at an increased risk for depression, anxiety and post-traumatic symptoms, and tragically are at a higher risk for being assaulted again. Such trauma in adolescence also places youth at a greater likelihood for making hazardous life choices, which oftentimes lead to substance abuse, eating disorders, and risky sexual behaviors.

Society largely tends to send the message that drinking is a rite of passage for youth and that alcohol provides innocent and harmless fun. This couldn't be further from the truth - adolescents and alcohol are a toxic mix. Allowing or turning a blind eye to underage drinking is not only illegal, but a disservice to your child or any young person involved —and potentially sets the scene for an assault to occur.