Media Influence on Adolescent Alcohol Use

Alcohol use by adolescents is a major health concern. Approximately three-fourths of adolescents have tried alcohol by the end of high school. Adolescents who begin to drink at an early age are at higher risk for injury, illness, long-term alcohol abuse, or even death related to alcohol use.

There are many influences on whether an adolescent begins to drink alcohol at a young age. Some of these include home life and whether parents have talked about rules for alcohol use with their children. Whether an adolescent’s peers drink alcohol also influences his or her likelihood of drinking alcohol. Another influence on adolescent drinking is the media: movies and television that depict alcohol use, music that includes lyrics about alcohol use, and advertisements for different brands of alcohol.

- Alcohol use on television and in movies: Research studies of adolescents have shown that teens who see alcohol use in movies and on television are more likely to start drinking alcohol at a younger age.
- Alcohol use as a topic in music: Research studies have shown that alcohol use is often a topic explored in songs that are popular among adolescents, and the lyrics of these songs often relate alcohol use to sex or violence.
- Alcohol in advertisements: The alcohol industry spent $1.7 billion in media advertising in 2009. Many alcohol advertisements are placed in different types of media that are popular among adolescents.
- A study in this month’s Archives looks at adolescents’ reports of their favorite alcohol brands. Brands named by adolescents as their favorites tended to be the same brands that have high advertising expenditures, such as Budweiser and Smirnoff. This suggests that alcohol advertising influences teens’ attitudes toward alcohol.
- Another study in this month’s Archives observed more than 2000 young adolescents who initially did not drink. Adolescents who were exposed to alcohol advertisements were more likely to say that they had a positive attitude toward alcohol use, and they were more likely to have started drinking alcohol by the end of the study period. This suggests that alcohol advertisements may lead adolescents to have positive attitudes toward alcohol and to start drinking alcohol.

WHAT CAN PARENTS DO?

Parents can help prevent the media from influencing their children’s attitudes toward alcohol use by using both of the following tools:

First, reduce exposure to the types of media that show alcohol use. This can be done by reducing your child’s media use overall, which has other health benefits. Another suggestion is to view media with your child and reduce exposure to media that have references to alcohol use.

Second, talk to your child regularly about what he or she is seeing or hearing in media related to alcohol use. You can help your child “outsmart” the alcohol advertisers by discussing false or misleading information. You can discuss how television and movies usually show only the positive side of alcohol use. This strategy is called “media literacy.”

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Center for Media Literacy

INFORM YOURSELF

To find this and other Advice for Patients articles, go to the Advice for Patients link on the Archives of Pediatrics & Adolescent Medicine Web site at http://www.archpediatrics.com.

Source: Center for Media Literacy