Preventing and Treating Adolescent Alcohol Use

Alcohol use often begins in adolescence or earlier. By the end of high school, about 75% of adolescents have tried alcohol, and more than half of 12th grade students report having been drunk at least once in their life. Although alcohol use is common, it has very serious consequences. Adolescents who drink alcohol experience negative health and social consequences, including problems with brain development and learning. Alcohol is involved in more than one-third of the adolescent deaths associated with unintentional injury, homicide, and suicide. These 3 causes together are the main causes of mortality in the US adolescent population.

PARENTS’ ROLE IN PREVENTION

There are many ways in which parents can prevent alcohol misuse by adolescents.

TALK TO YOUR ADOLESCENT ABOUT ALCOHOL. Talk early and often about your family’s views and rules about alcohol. These talks can make a big impression on teens, especially if they happen before the adolescent is in a situation in which alcohol is available.

PREVENT ACCESS TO ALCOHOL. Place any alcoholic beverages in your home in a safe place that you monitor frequently.

DO NOT ALLOW PARTIES WITH ALCOHOL AT HOME. Do not host parties where alcohol is served to minors. Do not serve alcohol to your own children in your home. These measures will not prevent alcohol problems or teach “safe drinking.” They are more likely to backfire and teach your children that underaged drinking is acceptable. Also, parents can be legally responsible for any problems or injuries resulting from these parties.

TEACH YOUR CHILD TO UNDERSTAND MEDIA MESSAGES ABOUT ALCOHOL. Media, including advertisements, television, movies, and social networking sites, can present a message that alcohol is fun and without risks. Talk with your children about how these messages are false and misleading.

SUPPORT YOUR CHILD’S INTERESTS AND ACTIVITIES. Encourage your child’s interest in other activities such as school clubs, sports, or arts. Involvement in these activities may prevent involvement in alcohol use.

TAKE YOUR CHILD TO HIS OR HER PEDIATRICIAN FOR REGULAR CHECKUPS. Yearly checkups are an opportunity for your pediatrician to talk with your child about ways to stay healthy. These discussions may include talking about alcohol use and other health risks.

WHAT IF I AM CONCERNED ABOUT MY CHILD’S ALCOHOL USE?

If you have concerns about your child’s alcohol use, a first place to begin is with your pediatrician. If you are not sure whether your child has a problem or not, it is better to see your pediatrician sooner rather than later (ie, waiting until an accident or injury happens). Your pediatrician can provide screening for alcohol use, and then direct you to resources and referrals as needed. There are many treatment options for adolescent alcohol abuse; an article in this issue of the Archives describes some of the more commonly used treatment approaches. Treatment typically involves counseling for the adolescent patient, and many approaches also involve parents. In more serious cases, the adolescent may need to be in an inpatient treatment center for days or weeks.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Leadership To Keep Children Alcohol Free Foundation
http://www.alcoholfreechildren.org/

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

Sources: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and American Academy of Pediatrics