



## JANUARY 2012 NEWSLETTER

### What can we do to prevent alcohol poisoning deaths?

One nonprofit's approach focuses on education about healthy choices, alcohol's harms, refusal skills

*“When I heard of how he died, it was unheard of. I mean, I just didn't think it was possible.”*

That comment was made by a young person whose college-age friend passed away after drinking a lethal amount of alcohol. The statement begs the questions: To what degree do young people understand that drinking too much can result in injury or death? And what steps are we as a society taking to educate them about the dangers of alcohol use?

Alcohol poisoning made international headlines last summer with the death of Amy Winehouse. The troubled singer, who battled addiction, reportedly had more than five times the legal limit of alcohol in her system when she died.

These deaths are examples of the tragic consequences of extreme drinking. In 2009, nearly 200,000 medical emergencies involved alcohol for patients 20 or younger, according to the Drug Abuse Warning Network. That represents almost half of all drug abuse/misuse emergency department visits made by patients in that age group. Among college-age people alone, an Associated Press analysis of federal records found that 157 individuals drank themselves to death from 1999 through 2005.



The population of people aged 12 to 20 who drank, binged on alcohol and were heavy drinkers has declined slightly in recent years. That's the good news. But, 17 percent of youth in that age range admitted to binge drinking, according to a 2010 national survey. And evidence shows many young drinkers have switched their drink of choice to hard liquor, a dangerous trend given its higher alcohol content.

One key to addressing these troubling realities is to effectively educate young people about alcohol's harms. But when should that education begin and how should we approach it at different ages?

Such conversations should start when kids are young, building a foundation on the powerful idea of what it means to make healthy choices. Emily Moser is director of parenting programs at Oregon Partnership, which exists to prevent substance abuse and suicide. Moser said the nonprofit recognizes the seriousness of extreme drinking among young people. Its approach to prevention focuses on promoting health and wellness as it relates to overall well-being.

Its Parents Teaching Prevention program trains parents and other adult volunteers to deliver lessons in kindergarten through sixth-grade classrooms that are age appropriate and weave health-related subjects into science, math and language arts. In the earlier grades, the focus is on staying healthy; in fourth, fifth and sixth grades, the lessons go into the pharmacology of alcohol use and comparing the body and mind of a young person who has had alcohol versus one who hasn't. The curriculum allows the flexibility for volunteers to discuss the lethal impacts of alcohol should a student ask about it.

“We focus on what it means to be a healthy young person, empowering kids to make good choices,” Moser said. “We talk about goal setting and refusal skills so kids are prepared to deal with risky situations as they grow up. During kindergarten through sixth grade we don’t discuss extreme drinking or alcohol poisoning, with the exception of talking in basic terms about the effects to the body and brain when people drink too much.”

Oregon Partnership also educates parents through classes that in part address extreme drinking among youth. “Our key message for parents is to encourage their kids to think critically and know how to remove themselves from dangerous situations,” Moser said. “If the subject of extreme drinking comes up with their kids, we encourage parents to address the responsible steps to take to help someone who has had too much alcohol.”

To be sure, all of us – including parents, schools and prevention professionals – have important roles to play to educate young people and curb extreme drinking. We want to hear from you. Are you involved in or know of programs successfully educating kids about alcohol’s harms, including the consequences of extreme drinking and appropriate steps to take if alcohol poisoning is a possibility? We hope this article will stimulate more discussion.

For more information, see  
[www.healthyalcoholmarket.com](http://www.healthyalcoholmarket.com)

*or*

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