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ADULTS MOST COMMON SOURCE OF ALCOHOL FOR TEENS, ACCORDING TO POLL OF TEENS 13-18

Polls show teenagers, especially girls, obtain alcohol easily from friends and family

CHICAGO – The American Medical Association (AMA) released the results of two nationwide polls today that reveal how underage youth obtain alcohol, as well as how easily and often. The polls also show parental opinions and behaviors about providing alcohol to teenagers and perceptions on how youth acquire alcohol. The polls were funded as part of the AMA’s partnership with The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.

“From a public health standpoint, these findings are frankly disturbing,” said J. Edward Hill, M.D., president of the AMA. “While it is of great concern to see how easily teens, especially young girls, get alcohol, it is alarming to know that legal-age adults, even parents, are supplying the alcohol.”

The poll of teens, aged 13-18, found that nearly half reported having obtained alcohol at some point. In all age groups, girls nearly always ranked higher than boys in obtaining alcohol. In the adult poll, about one out of four U.S. parents with children, aged 12-20 (26%), agree that teens should be able to drink at home with their parents present.

“Policies and law enforcement efforts to stop minors from obtaining alcohol are important, but this data reveals how easily avoided those policies and laws can be when legal-aged buyers are the leading source of alcohol for children,” said Hill. “And even parents who do not buy for their children could be unwitting sources if their alcohol at home is left unsecured.”

Two out of three teens, aged 13-18, said it is easy to get alcohol from their homes without parents knowing about it. One third responded that it is easy to obtain alcohol from their own parents knowingly, which increases to 40 percent when it is from a friend’s parent. And one in four teens have attended a party where minors were drinking in front of parents.

“Parents allowing underage children to drink under their supervision are under a dangerous misperception,” said Hill. “Injuries and car accidents after such parent-hosted parties remind us that no parent can completely control the actions of intoxicated youth, during or after a party. And the main message children hear is that drinking illegally is okay.”

Other key findings of the two polls include:

- Nearly one in four teens, aged 13-18, and one in three girls, aged 16-18, say their own parents have supplied them with alcohol, and teens who have obtained alcohol reported that, in the past six months, parents were the suppliers three times on average.
- While 71 percent of parents with children, aged 12-20, disagreed with the statement that teen drinking was okay if a parent were present, 76 percent think it is likely that teenagers get alcohol from someone’s parent—and they knew about it.

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- One out of four parents of children, aged 12-20 (25%), say they have allowed their teens to drink with their supervision in the past six months. Approximately one in 12 (8%) indicated they have allowed their teen's friends to also drink under their supervision in the past six months.
- While only eight percent of parents of children aged 12-20 indicated that they allowed their teen and his/her friends to drink with supervision in the past six months, 21 percent of teens attended a party where the alcohol was provided by someone else's parents. And 27 percent of teens attended a party where youth were drinking with parents present. This discrepancy suggests parents are unaware that other parents are allowing their own children to drink.

"The AMA applauds parents who discourage and disallow underage drinking," said Hill. "We hope that such parents willing to stand up for their children's health will be more vocal in their communities, letting children and other parents know that no adult should substitute their judgment for a teen's own parents. Drinking is not a rite of passage. Fatal car accidents, injuries and assaults, and irreversible damage to the brain are not rites of passage for any child."

According to the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, underage drinking is a leading cause of death among youth, including car accidents and fatal injuries. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services also found that alcohol is linked to two-thirds of all sexual assaults and date rapes of teens and increases the likelihood of contracting HIV or sexually transmitted diseases. An AMA report reveals the long-term damage that drinking does to teen brains, which continue developing until age 20.

The AMA said the poll results underscore the need for physicians to counsel parents on the health risks of alcohol use, as well as to advocate for policies to restrict access to minors. To assist physicians in their efforts, the AMA unveiled an informational poster for use in physician offices. The poster is the second in a series of educational materials that will help start a dialogue on this important health issue. The poster is available online at www.alcoholpolicy.md.com.

"Parents and physicians do not bare the burden alone for reducing high-risk drinking," said Hill. "A teen's desire to drink is also important to address, and the alcohol industry should be ashamed of itself for its extensive and aggressive promotion of products to those too young to buy them. The alcohol industry makes a parent's job much harder when it flaunts products at sporting events, festivals and concerts with little regard for the social and health consequences."

A study released in 2004 by the Center on Alcohol Marketing and Youth revealed that the number of alcohol commercials seen by young people, aged 12-20, continues to grow. And underage youth saw 48% more magazine advertising for beer and ale, than legal-aged adults in 2003.

"Alcohol is everywhere," said Steven Harris, a 14-year-old from San Bruno, California. "Young people see ads everywhere. We see drinking on TV and in the movies, and we see it at parties and at home. And it is probably harder for teens to get into an R-rated movie than to get alcohol. It's a joke."

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Editor's Note: The AMA Office of Alcohol and Other Drug Abuse directs two national programs, supported by The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation: Reducing Underage Drinking Through Coalitions and A Matter of Degree: The National Effort to Reduce High-Risk Drinking Among College Students.

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