

Underage Drinking

You Binge, You Bust
From In The Know Series

The national legal drinking age is 21. When anyone under the age of 21 consumes alcohol it's against the law. Underage drinking can have serious consequences to a young person's health, development and future.

The brain continues to develop from birth through the teen years and into the mid-20's. Drinking alcohol while your brain is still growing can cause permanent brain damage. The hippocampus, the part of the brain where learning and memory is located, is proven to be as much as 10 percent smaller in teens that drink alcohol. The prefrontal cortex, the part of your brain that deals with decision-making can also be damaged by alcohol. That's why people act "drunk" when consuming alcohol. Being "drunk" is actually a form of brain damage.

Underage drinking increases the chance of alcohol addiction. After being damaged by alcohol the brain attempts to rewire itself. This repair process often hard-wires the learned behavior of alcohol dependence. Alcohol dependence rates are highest between the ages of 18-20. Of adults who started drinking before age 15, 40 percent say they have the signs of alcohol dependence. That rate is four times higher than for adults who didn't drink until they were age 21.

In most states, the penalty for purchasing or attempting to purchase alcohol is the same or greater than the penalty for possessing or consuming alcohol. Breaking an alcoholic beverage law can lead to criminal charges before your 21st birthday and will remain on your permanent criminal record. Many people think creating and using fake Ids is a harmless part of growing up. But, using or creating a fake ID or driver's license to acquire liquor is a felony. Penalties vary, but usually include jail time, fines, community service, and suspension of your driver's license. Convicted felons cannot ever vote or carry a gun. And, as criminal records are public information, for the rest of your life you will have to check "Yes" in employment questionnaires asking if "you have ever been convicted of a felony."

Not having a driver's license and having a permanent criminal record is no way to start off your life. The best choice is to steer clear of underage drinking.