

Having a Drink? Keep Count, Keep Safe.

Make smart choices when you unwind – particularly when it comes to alcohol.

“Everyone should take a moment to review their drinking habits to determine if they are acting responsibly or taking drinking too far,” said Jonathan E. Fielding, MD, MPH, Director of Public Health and Health Officer. “Excessive drinking can put your health in jeopardy and can lead to serious safety risks for you and everyone around you. Many people don’t realize how little alcohol it takes to become impaired, and may overestimate their tolerance because they lose track of the number of drinks they’ve had, they’re trying to keep up with friends, or they want to make an impression.”

“There is a way to enjoy an alcoholic beverage responsibly by limiting the number of drinks you consume in one setting, paying attention to how much you’ve had to drink, designating a driver, not providing alcohol to those less than 21 years of age, and avoiding alcohol if you are pregnant or plan to become pregnant within three months,” said Dr. Fielding.

To determine whether you might have a drinking problem, try taking the **CAGE** test:

- Have you ever felt you should **cut down** on your drinking?
- Have people **annoyed** you by criticizing your drinking?
- Have you ever felt bad or **guilty** about your drinking?
- Have you ever had a drink first thing in the morning to steady your nerves or get rid of a hangover (an “**eye-opener**”)?

If you answered yes to two or more of these questions, you may be in need of treatment. Please contact your doctor, a Community Assessment Service Center (1-800-564-6600), or a treatment agency to determine your need for treatment.

With students in LA County and nationwide taking a breather from studies to enjoy spring break this month, those under the age of 21 may be tempted to drink. “Underage drinking is not only illegal, but a strong indicator of future struggles with alcohol abuse,” said Dr. Fielding. “Those who start drinking before age 15 are five times more likely to have alcohol problems as adults than those who start drinking at the legal age of 21 or older. If you are under 21, keep your count of alcoholic beverages at zero.”

Facts about underage drinking:

- Alcohol is the most widely abused substance among America’s youth: of those aged 12 to 20, more than a quarter drank alcohol in the past month, according to the National Survey on Drug Use and Health.
- Nearly one in five young adults and high school-aged teens reported binge drinking.

- 20% of all car crashes involving drivers aged 16 to 20 years also involve alcohol.
- Underage drinking can harm a youth's physical health, mental health, brain development, and can lead to risky sexual behavior, social problems, and alcohol dependence.
- Youth are likely to obtain alcohol either directly or indirectly from adults.
- Many youth start drinking with alcopops (*alcohol* and *pop*, also known as a flavored alcoholic beverage), which usually contain vodka or grain alcohol, sugar, flavoring and coloring.
- Because alcopops do not look, smell or taste like alcohol, these drinks are very popular with pre-teens and teens, especially girls, who would otherwise not drink alcoholic beverages like beer or hard liquor.
- More than 60% of teen girls who have seen ads for alcopops have tried these drinks, and the majority says alcopops are easier to drink than other alcoholic beverages.
- Many teens mistakenly believe that alcopops contain less alcohol than beer. A 12-ounce serving of an alcopop typically contains between 4-7 percent alcohol by volume, whereas a 12-ounce serving of a non-light beer typically contains between 4-6 percent alcohol by volume.

Facts about excessive alcohol consumption:

- Heavy drinking is defined as consuming more than two drinks per day for men, or more than one drink per day for women.
- Binge drinking is defined as consuming five or more drinks on a single occasion for men, or four or more drinks for women.
- Many adults may believe that limiting drinking to the weekends is a healthier alternative to drinking during the week. This is only true if alcohol consumption is kept within reasonable levels (for example, one or two drinks) on a single occasion.
- Both heavy and binge drinking can have serious health impacts such as liver damage, brain damage, and heart disease.
- In LA County, 16.2 percent of adults reported binge drinking within the past 30 days, compared to a nationwide average of 15.8 percent.
- Excessive alcohol use is the third leading preventable cause of death in the United States and is responsible for about 10,000 deaths and 72,000 hospitalizations in California annually.

Alcoholism is a chronic disease of alcohol dependence. Its symptoms, as described by the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, include:

- **Cravings:** A strong need, or urge, to drink. An alcoholic may continue to drink despite serious family, health, or legal problems
- **Loss of control:** Not being able to stop drinking once drinking has begun
- **Physical dependence:** Withdrawal symptoms, such as nausea, sweating, shakiness and anxiety after stopping drinking
- **Tolerance:** The need to drink greater amounts of alcohol to get “high”

For more information, visit the Department of Public Health’s Substance Abuse Prevention and Control website at <http://publichealth.lacounty.gov/sapc/>.

The Department of Public Health is committed to protecting and improving the health of the nearly 10 million residents of Los Angeles County. Through a variety of programs, community partnerships and services, Public Health oversees environmental health, disease control, and community and family health. Public Health comprises more than 4,000 employees and has an annual budget exceeding \$750 million. To learn more about Public Health and the work we do, please visit <http://www.publichealth.lacounty.gov>, visit our YouTube channel at <http://www.youtube.com/lapublichealth>, or follow us on Twitter: LAPublicHealth.

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