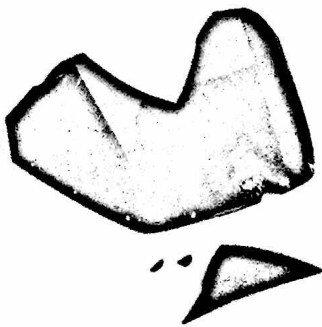


Alcohol Use: A High-Risk Behavior

Imagine turning on your TV or opening a newspaper and seeing a large, splashy ad promoting the sale and use of a dangerous drug such as cocaine or heroin. Most people would be outraged and shocked. Yet, ads of this kind appear every day. The drug's name is *alcohol*. It can cause accidents and other serious problems.



h t link

depressant For more information on depressants and their effects on the body, see Chapter 26, page 582.

HEALTH TERMS

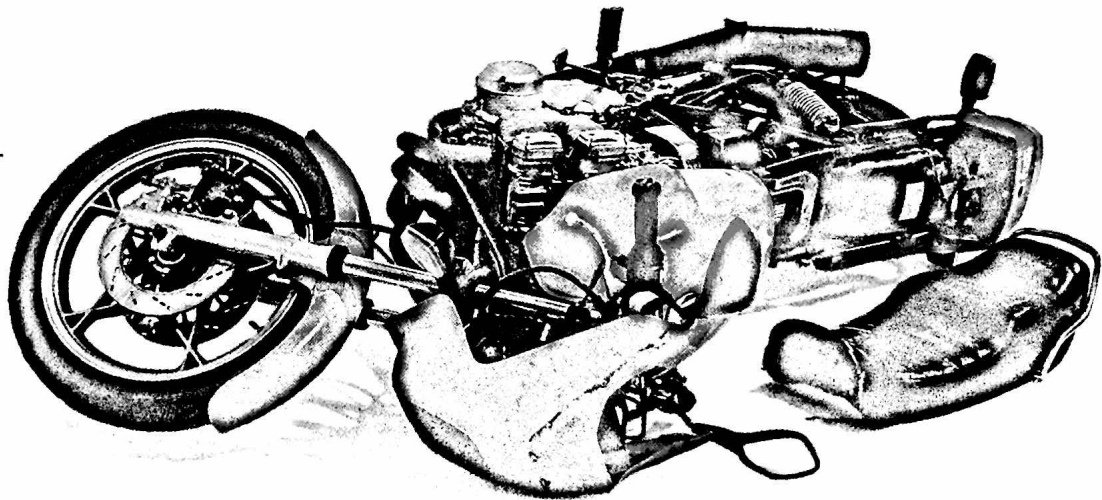
ethanol

fermentation

intoxication

HEALTH CONCEPTS

- Alcohol is a drug that has great potential for abuse.
- Drinking is against the law for minors, and it can have serious legal consequences.
- Drinking alcohol can be a high-risk behavior at any age, and it can damage or even ruin one's health, one's life, and the lives of others.
- Teens who drink alcohol do so for a variety of reasons.



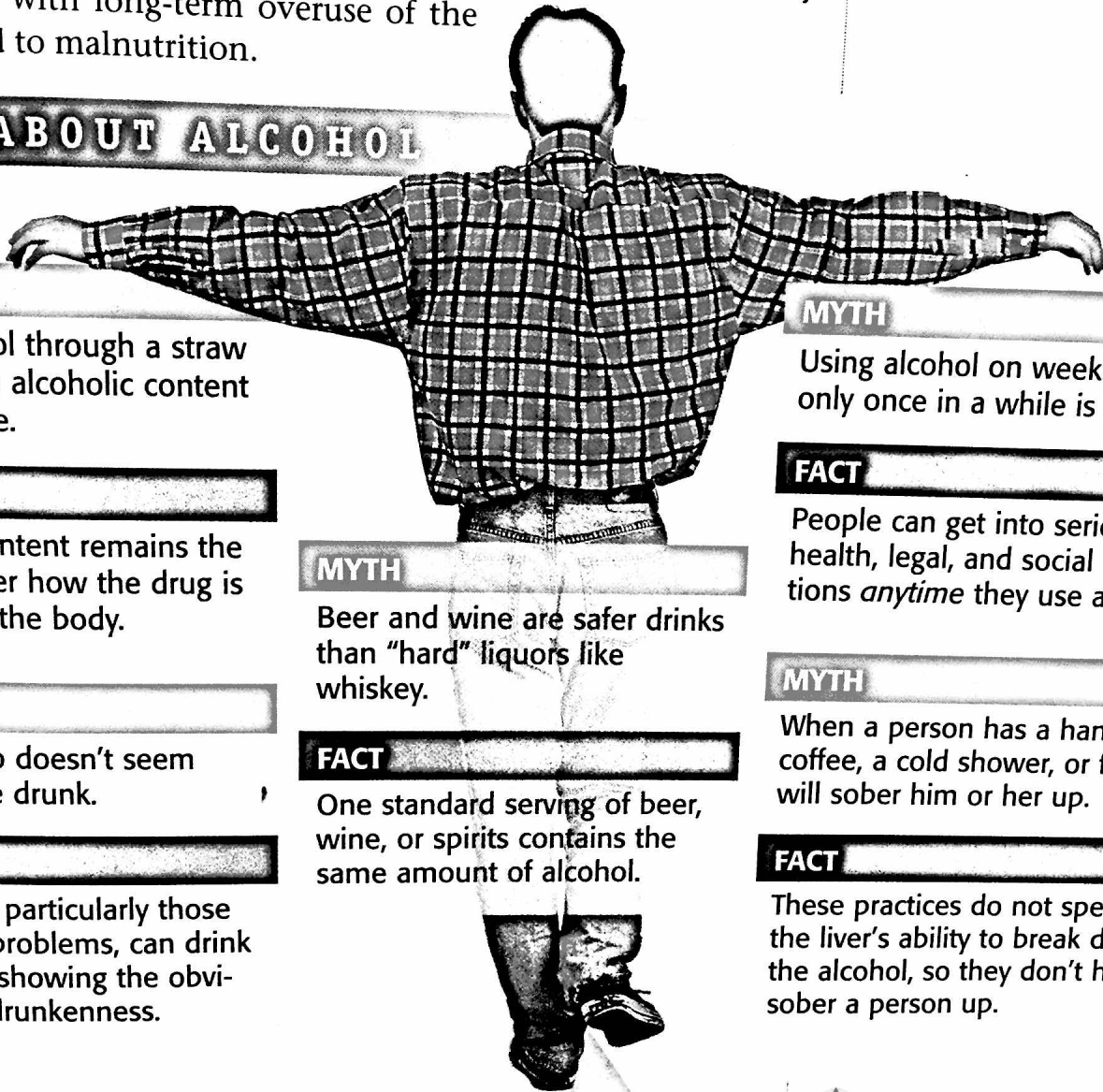
What Is Alcohol?

Alcohol, or more properly speaking, **ethanol**—the type of alcohol found in alcoholic beverages—is a powerful drug. Ethanol can be made synthetically, or it can be produced naturally by fermentation of fruits, vegetables, or grains. **Fermentation** is the chemical action of yeast on sugars. Water, flavoring, and minerals are added to ethanol to form one of several beverages, including beer and wine. Alcohol can also be processed to create spirits—or liquors—such as whiskey, rye, gin, and vodka. All have the potential to do serious harm.

At first, alcohol may give the drinker a certain energy and “buzz.” Soon, however, its true nature as a **depressant** takes over, causing the central nervous system to slow down. At some point in the consumption of alcohol, a state of intoxication sets in. **Intoxication** is physical and mental impairment resulting from the use of alcohol and can

range from an inability to walk to unconsciousness. Because the amount of alcohol needed for intoxication varies from person to person and because alcohol impairs judgment, driving a car or using heavy machinery when under its influence can have deadly consequences. Alcohol, moreover, robs the body of its ability to absorb key nutrients and, with long-term overuse of the drug, may lead to malnutrition.

MYTHS ABOUT ALCOHOL



MYTH

Drinking alcohol through a straw "filters out" the alcoholic content of the beverage.

FACT

The alcohol content remains the same no matter how the drug is delivered into the body.

MYTH

Someone who doesn't seem drunk can't be drunk.

FACT

Many people, particularly those with alcohol problems, can drink a lot without showing the obvious signs of drunkenness.

MYTH

Using alcohol on weekends or only once in a while is harmless.

FACT

People can get into serious health, legal, and social situations *anytime* they use alcohol.

MYTH

When a person has a hangover, coffee, a cold shower, or fresh air will sober him or her up.

FACT

These practices do not speed up the liver's ability to break down the alcohol, so they don't help to sober a person up.

MYTH

Beer and wine are safer drinks than "hard" liquors like whiskey.

FACT

One standard serving of beer, wine, or spirits contains the same amount of alcohol.

Alcohol and Teens

In recent years, as evidence of the harm drinking can do has increased, alcohol consumption among adults has declined. Yet, among teens it has not. According to the CDC's 1998 *Youth Risk Behavior Survey*, about 80 percent of teens nationwide have had at least one alcoholic drink during their lifetime.

At any age, alcohol use can become a high-risk behavior that affects the lives and health of drinkers and of those around them. For teens in particular, alcohol can have a negative impact on schoolwork, athletic performance, friendships, family relationships, and career goals. For many, it leads to health problems and, for some, even to death. Consider these facts:

- Half of all teens who die each year die as a direct result of alcohol or other drug use, and many of these deaths happen in accidents.

▲ **Misconceptions about alcohol use and effects can lead you into dangerous situations.**

ACTIVITY Investigate the truth about some myths you have heard about alcohol.

- Alcohol is a factor in many unplanned pregnancies as well as in cases of **sexually transmitted diseases, dating violence, rapes, suicides, and homicides.**
- Nearly 5 million problem drinkers in this country are between the ages of 14 and 17.

Consider these facts, and then consider that it is against the law for people under 21 years of age to buy, possess, or drink alcohol in the United States. Being caught drinking or drinking and driving can have serious legal consequences.

Why Young People Drink

If alcohol causes so much trouble, why do so many teens choose to drink? The reasons that teenagers give for drinking often are not very different from the reasons that adults give. Many claim that they drink

- to escape pressures or problems,
- to feel better or get over being sad or lonely,
- to deal with stress and relax,
- to feel more self-confident in social situations,
- for excitement,
- because their friends are doing it,
- to deal with boredom,
- to get away with something they are not supposed to do, and
- to fit in.

Factors that Affect Teen Alcohol Use

Friends are often an important, although unconscious, influence on a teenager's choice to drink. There is pressure to drink, and it can be very difficult to say no, especially when you want to be accepted as part of the group.

The family is another major influence on a teen's attitudes and behavior with respect to drinking. If a teen sees his or her parents use alcohol when they have problems or when they want to socialize or celebrate, there is a greater likelihood the teen will do the same.

Yet another factor in the decision of many teens to drink is the portrayal of alcohol in advertisements. Advertisers spend over \$1 billion a year promoting alcoholic beverages. These advertisers try to keep their product names prominent so that people remember them and are influenced when making a decision. By the time teens reach ninth grade, most will have seen more ads for wine and beer than for any other product. Many of these ads, moreover, are aimed at a teen audience and include one or more of the following:

- young people who are handsome, attractive, fit, and healthy-looking.
- a partylike atmosphere with upbeat music.
- an otherwise healthful environment, often in the beauty of the outdoors.
- problem-free drinking.
- a verbal message that really does not say anything about the risks of using the product.

Did You Know?

- Approximately 100 million Americans use alcohol.
- Ten teenagers a day die in alcohol-related crashes.
- About half of all fatal car crashes in this country involve alcohol.
- According to the National Safe Boating Council, alcohol is involved in more than 50 percent of the boating accidents in the United States.
- New efforts are being made to pass and enforce convictions for drunk boaters.



Good Reasons Not to Drink

While drinking and driving is known to be a bad combination, studies show that:

- ▶ Driving with a hangover may also diminish driving ability by as much as 20 percent.
- ▶ Alcoholics have a death rate that is 2.5 times higher than that of nonalcoholics.
- ▶ At low doses, alcohol has some of the effects of a stimulant; at higher doses, it acts as a depressant.
- ▶ Even small amounts of alcohol reduce one's sense of taste and smell and affects vision.
- ▶ Alcohol decreases fear and increases one's likelihood of taking dangerous risks.

EFFECTS OF ADVERTISING

The hidden message advertisers are sending through these images is that alcohol is an aid to successful, romantic, and problem-free relationships, working situations, and recreational opportunities. Advertisers would not spend the large sums of money they do if these ads did not accomplish their purpose. It is rare to see a sporting event these days that is not sponsored in part by a liquor or beer company. Car races, boat races, and tennis events are just a few examples. The brand names of alcohol are in abundance on college campuses where basketball and football scoreboards are sometimes donated to a school just to make the name of the company or product visible.

One of the most effective advertising gimmicks is having the consumer buy products with the name of the company on them. T-shirts and hats are examples of this type of promotion. By wearing the product, a person actually provides free advertising for the company.

You and Your Decisions About Drinking

Everyone has the need to belong, to feel loved, and to feel important. It is possible to meet these needs in many ways. Drinking does not have to be one of them.

Using alcohol in any form has no place in your life. It is unhealthy, unsafe, and in most places illegal. As you apply your decision-making skills to the question of whether to drink, you will see that the negative consequences greatly outweigh any imagined benefits. In the remainder of this chapter, you will learn more about these consequences, and you will learn strategies for saying no to alcohol.