

About Alcohol

LESSON OBJECTIVES

- identify the effects of alcohol use
- explore the decision making process and practice research skills
- examine the reasons young people start drinking

CONTENT AND TIME (30-MINUTE LESSON)

5.1 Introduction: About Alcohol (20 minutes)

5.2 Activity (10 minutes)

REQUIRED MATERIALS

HANDOUT 5.1: The interview

SUGGESTED RESOURCES

Centre for Addiction and Mental Health Web site at www.camh.ca

5.1 Introduction: About Alcohol

(20 minutes)

Alcohol is a liquid made by fermenting or distilling grains and fruit. It is considered a drug because of its mood-altering effects. It can make you feel relaxed, less inhibited, and intoxicated (drunk).

There are two kinds of alcohol in common use. Ethyl alcohol is the kind present in beer, wine, spirits, and liqueurs. Methyl alcohol is completely different and is found in solvents, paint removers, antifreeze, and other household and industrial products. It is a poison and should never be consumed.

Effects on the body

Alcohol is often thought of as a stimulant but is actually classed as a depressant or “downer.” Depressants are drugs that slow down or depress the functioning of the central nervous system (CNS). The CNS includes the brain and the nerve pathways that control muscle action.

Even the initial apparent stimulant effect of alcohol actually results from the depression of centres in the brain that inhibit actions and control behaviour.

Alcohol is rapidly absorbed into the blood-stream from the stomach, small intestine, and colon. Food in the stomach will slow absorption into the bloodstream. Alcohol is broken down (metabolized) by an enzyme present in the liver and the stomach called ADH. Women’s bodies have less of this enzyme.

The effects of alcohol depend on how much is in the bloodstream—the blood alcohol concentration (BAC). The drinker’s BAC is affected by several factors: the amount consumed in a given time, the drinker’s size, biology, body build, and metabolism.

Short term effects of alcohol include increased stomach secretions, dilated blood vessels in the skin causing loss of body heat (despite a feeling of warmth), and increased urine production. A common short-term effect of drinking alcohol is a sense of well-being.

This feeling could be accompanied by drowsiness, dizziness, and flushing. With continued drinking, coordination, speech, and vision are affected.

Drinking heavily over a long period of time can lead to serious health problems such as stomach ulcers, sexual problems, liver disease, brain damage, and many kinds of cancer.

Drinking while pregnant can cause Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD). FASD is a disorder that can include physical abnormalities and problems in functioning caused by alcohol use during pregnancy.

Withdrawal occurs if alcohol intake is suddenly stopped. Symptoms may include loss of appetite, nausea, anxiety, sleeplessness, irritability, confusion, sweating, and tremors (shakes). Convulsions and hallucinations may occur. Delirium tremens (DTs) is the most severe effect, and is characterized by extreme agitation and disorientation, high body temperature, accelerated heart rate, and terrifying hallucinations (seeing or feeling things such as bugs crawling on skin).

The hangover experienced after a heavy bout of drinking is in part caused by mild alcohol withdrawal. Fatigue, headache, nausea, and sometimes vomiting and shakiness most often occur eight to 12 hours after drinking stops.

People who use alcohol may find that they need more and more to get the same effect. This is referred to as building up tolerance.

Problem use

Most people are able to drink alcohol in a safe and responsible way. However, some people become physically dependent on alcohol and are not able to function without it in their systems. Other people are able to go days or weeks without alcohol but drink a great deal at one time. This is called “binge drinking.” In general, problem use is use that affects a person’s life in a negative way. In looking at alcohol use, it is important to consider the following life areas: physical and emotional health, relationships, job and/or school performance, finances, and legal issues. A person experiencing problems in any of these areas may be developing or have a problem with alcohol.

Decisions about alcohol use

Decisions that young people make about the use of alcohol are influenced by many factors. These include the social situation that they may be in at the time, how they feel about themselves, their interpersonal skills, and other people’s opinions of them. When they are making decisions about alcohol use, it is helpful for young people to consider what they already know about alcohol, as well as the alternatives to, and consequences of using alcohol.

5.2 Activity

(10 minutes)

Provide each student with a copy of “The interview.” Explain to the youth that during the next few days they will be asked to interview two people to develop an understanding of why young people make the decision either to use or not to use alcohol.

They are to interview one older adolescent or young adult (e.g., older sibling or cousin) and one adult (parent, aunt, uncle) to get two perspectives. Ask them to summarize their findings and add their personal thoughts to this summary.

After the interviews have been completed, have them work in groups of three or four to compile their interview results. Ask them to decide on a format in which to present their findings. Their format can be a short report or a chart. Have each group present their findings to another group in the classroom and compare results. Discuss the findings with the group.

Remind the group that there are a variety of reasons for either choice. The interviews they complete will help them understand why young people make different choices.

DEBRIEF

- What are some common reasons that young people choose to use alcohol?
- What are some reasons that people choose not to use alcohol?
- What are the things to think about in deciding whether you will use alcohol? (e.g., consequences, risks)
- What are some ways to have fun without using alcohol?

The Interview

Interview a young adult/older sibling

1. Did you consume alcohol as a teenager?

2. Think about your use. What made you decide to use alcohol?
Give two reasons for your decision.

3. If you did not use alcohol, give at least two reasons for your decision.

Interview an Adult

1. Did you consume alcohol as a teenager?

2. Think about your use. What made you decide to use alcohol?
Give two reasons for your decision.

3. If you did not use alcohol, give at least two reasons for your decision.

Summary

1. List three reasons why teenagers might use alcohol.

2. List three reasons they may choose not to use alcohol.

3. What do you think are the reasons that teenagers use alcohol?
The reasons they don't use alcohol?
