

## WHY 21?

# Addressing Underage Drinking

More than 25,000 lives<sup>1,2</sup> have been saved in the U.S. thanks to the 21 Minimum Legal Drinking Age.<sup>10,11</sup>

This law continues to prevent tragedies—decreasing crashes by an estimated 16 percent<sup>9</sup> and keeping young people safer from many risks.<sup>13</sup>

Sometimes, without knowing all the facts, people assert that youth shouldn't have to wait until they're 21 to drink. James C. Fell, a public health researcher at the Pacific Institute for Research & Evaluation, responds to their questions.

## **Why do we make young people wait until 21 to drink alcohol?**

Many activities have ages of initiation. A person must wait until age 16 to start driving, age 18 to marry without parental consent, age 35 to become president, and so on.

The age limit for alcohol is based on research which shows that young people react differently to alcohol. Teens get drunk twice as fast as adults,<sup>9</sup> but have more trouble knowing when to stop. Teens naturally overdo it and binge more often than adults.

Enforcing the legal drinking age of 21 reduces traffic crashes,<sup>4-6</sup> protects young people's maturing brains,<sup>12,14</sup> and keeps young people safer overall.

## **Can't parents teach their teens how to drink alcohol responsibly by giving them small amounts—under supervision—before they reach 21?**

Some states permit parents to do this with their own child (rarely, if ever, with someone else's child), but there's no evidence that this approach actually works.<sup>3</sup> As matter of fact, there is evidence to contrary. When teens feel they have their parents' approval to drink, they do it more and more often when they are not with their parents. When parents have concrete, enforced rules about alcohol, young people binge drink less.

## **Would lowering the legal drinking age make alcohol less of a big deal, and less attractive to teens?**

History says no. When states had lower legal drinking ages in the U.S., the underage drinking problem was worse.<sup>3</sup> For example, before the 21 minimum legal drinking age was implemented by all states, underage drunk drivers were involved in over twice as many fatal traffic crashes as today.<sup>3</sup>

## **I thought Europeans have fewer underage drinking problems ... is it because their kids drink from an earlier age?**

That's a myth. European countries have worse problems than America does, as far as binge drinking and drinking to intoxication.<sup>2</sup> Studies show that Europe has more underage drunkenness, injury, rape, and school problems due to alcohol.<sup>1,3</sup> Since alcohol is more available there, it actually increases the proportion of kids who drink in Europe.

## **Some people propose a 40-hour alcohol education course for teens that would entitle teens to drink before 21. Is this a good idea?**

Research shows that education alone doesn't prevent risky behaviors. For example, driver education by itself does not reduce youth car crashes. Beginning drivers need other restrictions in place, such as curfews and passenger limits, to stay safe. In addition, there are clear health risks associated with underage drinking.<sup>7</sup>

## Brain Development

The human brain continues to grow into a person's early 20s. Drinking alcohol during that time can damage short and long-term brain growth and that damage can be permanent.<sup>1</sup> And it's not just heavy drinking that can impact teens -- teens who drink half as much alcohol as adults can still suffer the same negative effects.<sup>2</sup> Teens are more likely to suffer blackouts, memory loss, and alcohol poisoning from drinking, as well as to cause damage to their ability to remember things in the future.<sup>3</sup> All parts of the growing brain are impacted negatively by alcohol, but the memory function is especially hard hit.

So, what impacts does that have on a teen? Well, adolescent drinkers perform worse in school, are more likely to fall behind and have an increased risk of social problems, depression, suicidal thoughts and violence.<sup>4</sup> Also, because the brain (specifically, the regulation of the brain through serotonin, which provides balance and impulse control) becomes used to the use of alcohol, people who begin drinking in their teens are not only at greater risk for developing alcoholism sometime in their lives, they are also at greater risk for developing alcoholism more quickly and at younger ages, especially chronic, relapsing alcoholism.<sup>3</sup>