

# THE SURGEON GENERAL'S CALL TO ACTION

## TO PREVENT AND REDUCE UNDERAGE DRINKING

What It Means to **YOU**

*A Guide to Action  
for Families*



# ABOUT THIS SURGEON GENERAL'S CALL TO ACTION

The Surgeon General is the Nation's top doctor and public health officer. The President of the United States appoints the Surgeon General to help protect and promote the health of the Nation.

The Surgeon General lets people across the country know the latest news on how to get healthy and stay healthy. He explains how to avoid illness and injury.

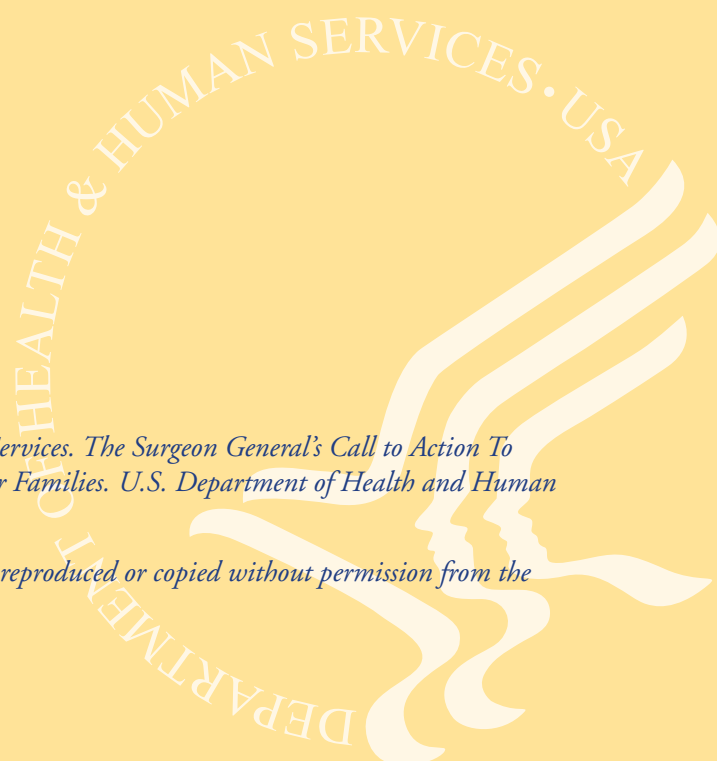
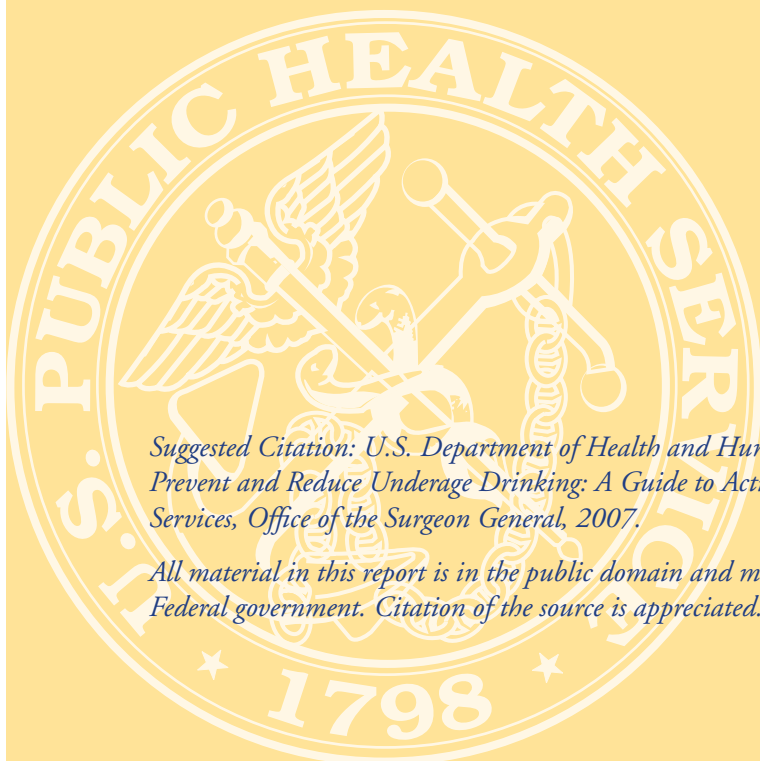
When a health topic needs special attention, the Surgeon General issues a national call to action to everyone in America. The *Surgeon General's Call to Action To Prevent and Reduce Underage Drinking* explains why underage alcohol use is a major public health and safety issue. It asks everyone to take action.

## About This Guide to Action for Families

When it comes to tackling public health problems, knowledge is power. When people have the facts and the right tools, they can take action. This guide gives you the knowledge and tools you need to take action against underage drinking. It tells you about underage alcohol use and the damage it can do. And, it suggests ways you can end underage drinking in your home, family, community, and across the country.

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# TODAY, NEARLY 10.8 MILLION YOUTH, AGES 12-20, ARE UNDERAGE DRINKERS

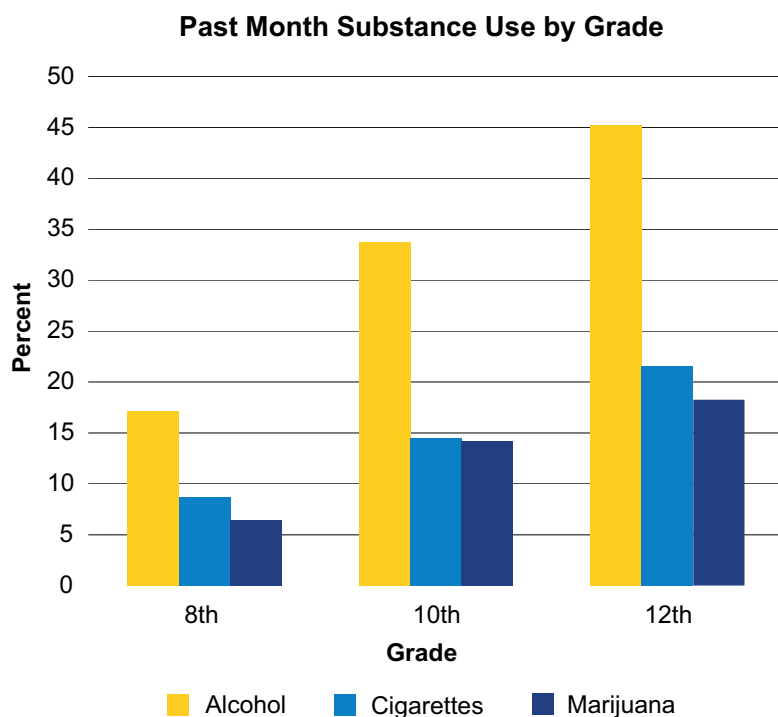
Drinking alcohol can harm the growing body and brain. That's why it's important for young people to grow up alcohol-free. And it takes everyone to help young people choose not to drink alcohol. It takes you.

## What Is Underage Drinking?

When anyone under age 21 drinks alcohol, we call it underage drinking. And underage drinking is against the law, except in special cases, such as when it is part of a religious ceremony. Underage drinking is also dangerous. It can harm the mind and body of a growing teen in ways many people don't realize.

Yet, children and teens still drink, even though it can harm them. Underage drinking is a serious problem, with roots deep in our culture. It is time to change that picture. It's time to take action. It's time to stop looking the other way. It's time to tell children and teens that underage drinking is not okay. It will take a lot of work over time to change how people think about underage drinking. It's a long-term project for parents, schools, local groups, community leaders, and other concerned adults. And it's a project that should start when children are young and continue through the teen years.

- ◆ In any month, more youth are drinking than are smoking cigarettes or using marijuana.



**More teens  
drink alcohol  
than smoke  
or use drugs.**

—Johnston, et al. 2006 *Monitoring the Future National Survey Results on Drug Use*.

# THE FACTS



- ◆ As they grow older, the chance that young people will use alcohol grows. Approximately 10% of 12-year-olds say they have used alcohol at least once. By age 13 that number doubles. And by age 15, approximately 50% have had at least one drink.
- ◆ Alcohol dependence is a term doctors use when people have trouble controlling their drinking, and when their consumption of, or preoccupation with, alcohol occurs to the extent that it interferes with normal personal, family, social, or work life. Alcohol dependence rates are highest among young people between ages 18 and 20. And they're not even old enough to drink legally.

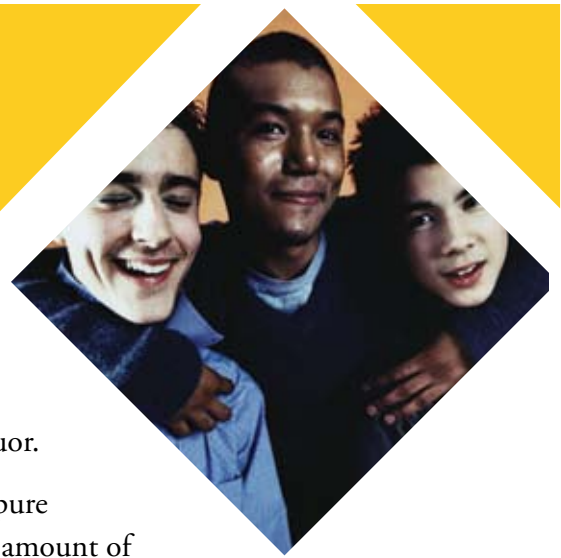
## Did You Know?

- ◆ The greatest influence on young people's decisions to begin drinking is the world they live in, which includes their families, friends, schools, the larger community, and society as a whole.
- ◆ Alcohol use by young people often is made possible by adults. After all, teens can't legally get alcohol on their own.

## FAST FACT

Most young people who start drinking before age 21 do so when they are about 13-14 years old. That's why it's important to start talking early and keep talking about underage drinking. And that's why ALL adults working with young people should send the same message that underage drinking is not okay.

# WHAT IS “A DRINK,” ANYWAY?

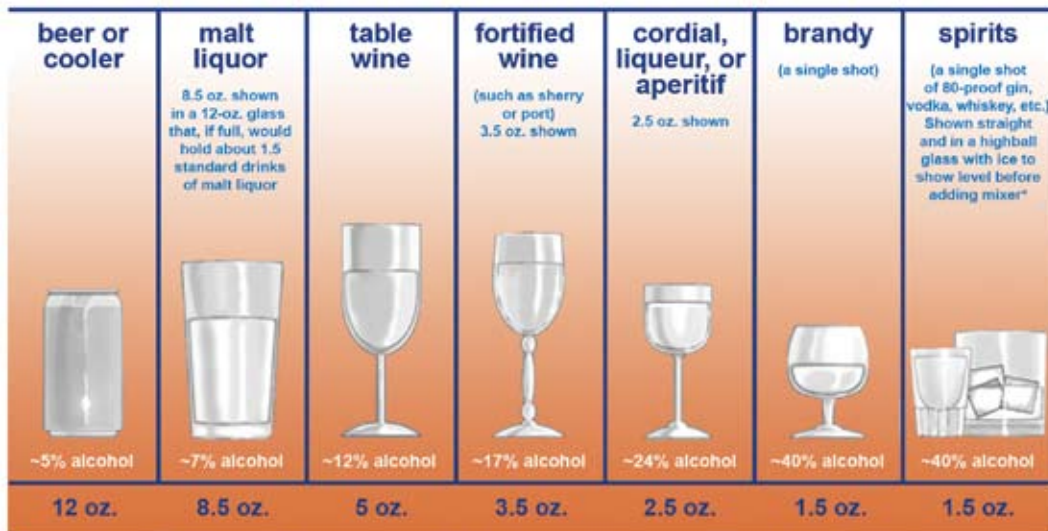


A drink can come in many forms. It can be a shot of hard liquor or a mixed drink containing vodka, rum, tequila, gin, scotch, etc. It can also be wine, a wine cooler, beer, or malt liquor.

A standard drink is any drink that contains about 14 grams of pure alcohol (about 0.6 fluid ounces or 1.2 tablespoons). This is the amount of alcohol usually found in—

- ◆ One 12-ounce beer
- ◆ One 4- to 5-ounce glass of wine
- ◆ One 1.5-ounce shot of 80 proof liquor

## What’s a Standard Drink?



\*Note: It can be difficult to estimate the number of standard drinks served in a single mixed drink made with hard liquor. Depending on factors, such as type of spirits and the recipe, one mixed drink can contain from one to three or more standard drinks.

But not all drinks are standard drinks. In fact, different drinks often have different amounts of alcohol. Mixed drinks may contain more than one shot of liquor, and different beers or wines may not have the same amount of alcohol in them, even when the drinks are the same size. For example, some beers and beer products, like “ice” beers, and malt liquors, and some wines, have more alcohol than others.

**Remember, the legal drinking age is 21 and underage drinking can be a threat to health and development.**

# WHY IS UNDERAGE DRINKING A PROBLEM?

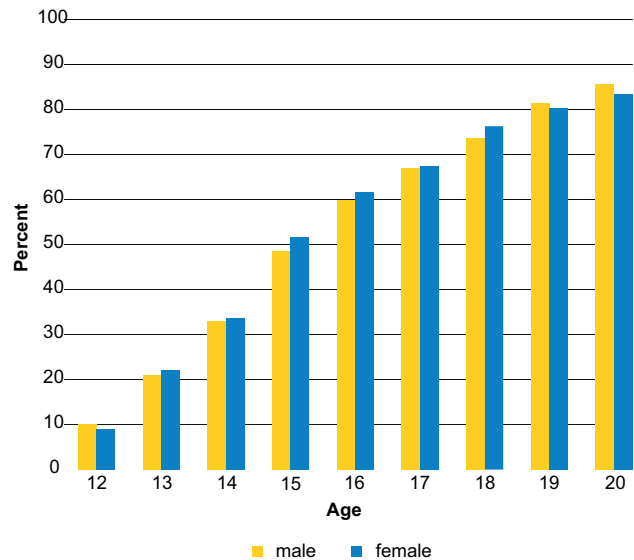
## So many young people drink.

Many more young people use alcohol than tobacco or illegal drugs. By age 18, more than 70% of teens have had at least one drink.

**When young people drink, they drink a lot at one time.** Teens drink less often than adults. But when teens do drink, they drink more than adults. On average, young people have about 5 drinks on a single occasion. This is called binge drinking, a very dangerous way of drinking that can lead to serious problems and even death.

**Early drinking can cause later alcohol problems.** Of adults who started drinking before age 15, around 40% 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.

Percent of Youth Who Have Used Alcohol by Age and Gender



—SAMHSA, 2005 National Survey on Drug Use & Health (NSDUH)

## FAST FACT

Rates of death and injury nearly triple between the early teen years and early adult life. Dangerous activities like underage drinking play a large role. That's why ending teen alcohol use can help save lives.

**Alcohol may have a special appeal for young people.** The teen years are a time of adventure, challenges, and taking risks. Alcohol is often one of the risks young people take. But most people don't know how alcohol affects a teen's body and behavior. They don't realize that alcohol can affect young people in different ways from adults. And they don't realize that underage drinkers can also harm people other than themselves.

# THE RESULTS OF UNDERAGE DRINKING CAN BE GRAVE

## Many people don't know that underage alcohol use—

- ◆ **Is a major cause of death from injuries among young people.** Each year, approximately 5,000 people under the age of 21 die as a result of underage drinking; this includes about 1,900 deaths from motor vehicle crashes, 1,600 as a result of homicides, 300 from suicide, as well as hundreds from other injuries such as falls, burns, and drownings.
- ◆ **Increases the risk of carrying out, or being a victim of, a physical or sexual assault.**
- ◆ **Can affect the body in many ways.** The effects of alcohol range from hangovers to death from alcohol poisoning.
- ◆ **Can lead to other problems.** These may include bad grades in school, run-ins with the law, and drug use.
- ◆ **Affects how well a young person judges risk and makes sound decisions.** For example, after drinking, a teen may see nothing wrong with driving a car or riding with a driver who has been drinking.
- ◆ **Plays a role in risky sexual activity.** This can increase the chance of teen pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), including HIV, the virus that causes AIDS.
- ◆ **Can harm the growing brain, especially when teens drink a lot.** Today we know that the brain continues to develop from birth through the teen years into the mid-20s.





## The Teen Years Are a Time of Many Changes

- ◆ Boys physically become young men and girls become young women.
- ◆ Young people move from elementary to middle to high school. Responsibilities increase. For example, teens learn to drive, may get a job, and have more chores and more homework.
- ◆ Teens spend less time with their parents. They spend more time alone or with friends. They also like to stay up later and sleep in.
- ◆ Teens search for who they really are and who they want to be. They worry about friendships and social groups. And they have growing romantic and sexual interests.
- ◆ The desire for adventure, excitement, and action increases. That's why many young people want to take more chances, try new things, and be more independent.

These changes are important steps on the road to adult life. However, these changes also increase the chance that some young people may turn to alcohol.

### Did You Know?

**The different “worlds” teens live in can have a big effect on their drinking.** Some young people are more involved with family than others. Others turn to their friends first. Still others turn to social groups like sports teams and clubs, faith-based groups, or groups of like-minded youth. The Internet, media, music, and videos are also an important part of the world of most teens. All of these affect a young person's choices about using alcohol.

### FAST FACT

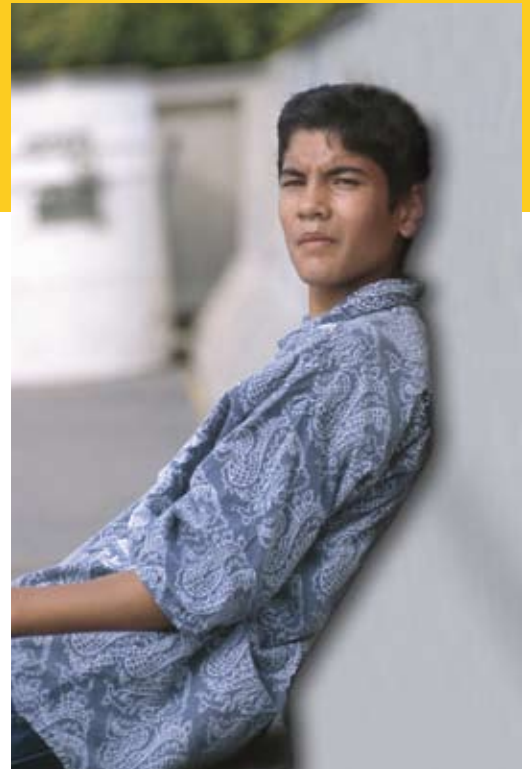
Factors in an adolescent's environment affect both the appeal of alcohol and its availability. Among these factors are the social systems within which teens function and with which they interact. Examples of these social systems are parents, friends, family, schools, and the community. The media and the larger social culture, including how alcohol is marketed and portrayed, also contribute to alcohol's appeal to young people.



## Why Teens May Choose to Drink

Many things affect a young person's decisions about drinking—

- ◆ The different “worlds” in which teens live, including family, friends, school, and community
- ◆ A greater desire to take risks
- ◆ Less connection to parents and more independence
- ◆ More time spent with friends and by themselves
- ◆ Increased stress
- ◆ Greater attention to what teens see and hear about alcohol



## Did You Know?

Teens with behavior or family problems are at higher risk for alcohol use. And if anyone in the family has a drinking problem, it can affect the entire family. It also may affect a teen's choices about drinking.

### FAST FACT

Youth with histories of behavior problems (for example, delinquent activity, impulsive actions, and difficulty controlling responses) are more likely to use alcohol than are other young people. The same is true for youth who have an unusually strong desire for new experiences and sensations, and for those with histories of family conflict and stress, and/or alcohol problems.

# UNDERAGE DRINKING IS EVERYONE'S PROBLEM

## Underage drinking can affect anyone, including people who don't drink.

- ◆ Underage alcohol use can lead to dangerous behavior, property damage, and violence.
- ◆ The results can be injury and even death for the drinker, and for other people nearby.
- ◆ About 45% of people who die in car crashes involving a drinking driver under age 21 are people other than the driver.

The effects of underage drinking can be felt by everyone. That makes underage alcohol use everyone's problem.

### FAST FACT

Most 6-year-olds know that alcohol is only for adults. Between ages 9 and 13, youth begin to think that alcohol use is okay. That's why it's never too early to start talking with young people about the dangers of underage drinking.

Teens say that they rely on adults in their lives more than anyone else to help them make tough decisions and to provide good advice.

# ENDING UNDERAGE DRINKING IS EVERYONE'S JOB

## There is a role for everyone.

- ◆ Everyone can work together to create a community where young people can grow up and feel good about themselves without drinking.
- ◆ Everyone in the community should deliver the message that underage drinking is not okay. The message should be the same whether youth hear it in school, at home, in places of worship, on the sports field, in youth programs, or in other places where young people gather.
- ◆ It is important for families to pay attention to what's happening with their teens.
- ◆ Young people can learn about the dangers of alcohol use. They can change how they and others think about drinking.



**It's time to change how we all think, talk, and act when it comes to underage drinking. We need to stop accepting it and to start discouraging it. It's time to help young people understand that it is not okay for them to drink alcohol. The discussion needs to start long before youth start thinking about drinking.**

# WHAT FAMILIES CAN DO ABOUT UNDERAGE ALCOHOL USE

**While many teens drink alcohol, underage alcohol use is not inevitable.** Families are not helpless to prevent it. Focus your efforts on the factors that protect teens from alcohol use. At the same time, you can work to reduce the factors that increase the chance that they will drink.

## **Support your teens and give them space to grow.**

- ◆ Be involved in your teens' lives. Be loving and caring.
- ◆ Encourage your teens' growing independence, but set appropriate limits.
- ◆ Make it easy for your teens to share information about their lives.
- ◆ Know where your teens are, what they're doing, who they're with, and who their friends are.
- ◆ Find ways for your teens to be involved in family life, such as doing chores or caring for a younger brother or sister.
- ◆ Set clear rules, including rules about alcohol use. Enforce the rules you set.

## **Talk with your teens about alcohol use.**

- ◆ When you talk with your teens about drinking, listen to them and respect what they say.
- ◆ Make clear your expectation that your teens will not drink.
- ◆ Teach your children about the dangers of underage drinking.
- ◆ Discuss laws about underage drinking, including the age 21 law.

## **Help your teens make good decisions about alcohol.**

- ◆ Help your teens know how to resist alcohol.
- ◆ Help them find ways to have fun without alcohol.
- ◆ Do not give alcohol to your teens. Tell them that any alcohol in your home is off limits to them and to their friends.
- ◆ Don't let your teens attend parties where alcohol is served. Make sure alcohol isn't available at teen parties in your own home.
- ◆ Set clear rules about not drinking and enforce them consistently.
- ◆ Help your teens avoid dangerous situations such as riding in a car driven by someone who has been drinking.
- ◆ Help your teens get professional help if you're worried about their involvement with alcohol.

### **Be aware of factors that may increase the risk of teen alcohol use.**

- ◆ Significant social transitions such as graduating to middle or high school, or getting a driver's license
- ◆ A history of conduct problems
- ◆ Depression and other serious emotional problems
- ◆ A family history of alcoholism
- ◆ Contact with peers involved in deviant activities



### **Be a positive adult role model.**

- ◆ If you drink yourself, drink responsibly. That means not drinking too much or too often.
- ◆ Stay away from alcohol in high-risk situations. For example, don't drive or go boating when you've been drinking.
- ◆ Get help if you think you have an alcohol-related problem.

### **Work with others.**

No matter how close you and your teens are, it may not be enough to prevent them from drinking. It's hard for families to do this alone. It's important to reach out to schools, communities, and government. You can help protect teens from underage alcohol use by working to see to it that—

- ◆ Schools and the community support and reward young people's decisions not to drink.
- ◆ Rules about underage drinking are in place at home, at school, and in your community. Penalties for breaking the rules are well known. Rules are enforced the same way for everyone.
- ◆ All laws about underage alcohol use are well known and enforced.
- ◆ Parties and social events at home and elsewhere don't permit underage drinking.

# ADVANCING THE CALL TO ACTION

The *Surgeon General's Call to Action To Prevent and Reduce Underage Drinking* was written to improve public knowledge about underage drinking. It encourages action by people and groups nationwide. Each person in America has a role to play to help prevent and reduce underage alcohol use. This *Call to Action* helps adults across the country rethink underage drinking as we know it today. It provides the tools to get the word out in discussions around the dinner table, in school or campus-based programs, and in communities. It can also inform local, Tribal, State, and national programs and policies.

By learning more about how underage drinking affects a teen's growing body and brain, family and other adults in the community can better help protect youth from the dangers of underage drinking. Family and caring adults in the community can help teens choose not to drink. Finally, communities can help create a safer environment for young people by working together with parents and with schools, health care professionals, local organizations, and policymakers to prevent and reduce underage drinking.

This *Call To Action* is exactly that. It calls on every adult in the country to join with the Surgeon General in a national effort to address underage drinking early and often.

Underage alcohol use is everyone's problem—and its *solutions are everyone's responsibility*.

## References for "A Guide to Action for Families"

*The data, facts, and suggestions presented here come primarily from the Surgeon General's Call to Action To Prevent and Reduce Underage Drinking, cited on the inside front cover. Other sources of some data presented in this document include:*

Grant BF, Dawson DA, Stinson FS, Chou SP, Dufour MC, Pickering RP. The 12-month prevalence and trends in DSM-IV alcohol abuse and dependence: United States, 1991-1992 and 2001-2002. *Drug and Alcohol Dependence* 74:223-234, 2004.

Johnston LD, O'Malley PM, Bachman JG, Schulenberg JE. (December 21, 2006). *Teen drug use continues down in 2006, particularly among older teens; but use of prescription-type drugs remains high*. University of Michigan News and Information Services: Ann Arbor, MI. [On-line]. Available: [www.monitoringthefuture.org](http://www.monitoringthefuture.org); accessed 01/03/07.

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. *Results from the 2005 National Survey on Drug Use and Health: National Findings*. Rockville (MD): U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration; 2006. Available: [www.oas.samhsa.gov/nsduh.htm](http://www.oas.samhsa.gov/nsduh.htm); accessed 01/03/07.



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# FOR MORE INFORMATION

*Underage drinking is a public health and safety problem that results in serious personal, social, and economic consequences for adolescents, their families, communities, and the Nation as a whole. Your involvement can make a difference.*

Many free sources of information are available to help you take action to prevent and reduce underage drinking. Some of the materials can help better educate youth and their families, your colleagues, and your community about the dangers of underage drinking and how to help stop it before it starts.

- ◆ To read the entire *Surgeon General's Call to Action To Prevent and Reduce Underage Drinking*, be sure to log on to the Surgeon General's Web site at [www.surgeongeneral.gov](http://www.surgeongeneral.gov).
- ◆ For more information about ways you can help to prevent and reduce underage drinking in your community, please check out [www.stopalcoholabuse.gov](http://www.stopalcoholabuse.gov), a comprehensive portal of Federal resources for information on underage drinking and ideas for combating the problem.
- ◆ Another excellent source of information is the Web site of the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism at <http://www.niaaa.nih.gov>.
- ◆ General information about underage drinking, its effects on adolescents, families and communities, and what you can do to help stop underage drinking is available through the National Clearinghouse on Alcohol and Drug Information (NCADI), on the Internet at <http://ncadi.samhsa.gov/> or by calling (800) 729-6686.

The words and images in this Guide to Action were designed to reach a broad audience. Copies of this booklet and the *Surgeon General's Call to Action To Prevent and Reduce Underage Drinking* can be downloaded from both of the Web sites noted. To order copies by mail, please contact the National Clearinghouse on Alcohol and Drug Information (NCADI) <http://ncadi.samhsa.gov/> or by calling (800) 729-6686.

