

The Underage Drinking Epidemic

TEENS ARE FINDING NEW—AND MORE DANGEROUS—WAYS TO BINGE THAN EVER BEFORE. WHAT WE CAN DO. **By Emily Listfield ■ Cover and inside photograph by Levi Brown**

LINDA B.* AND HER HUSBAND were sound asleep when the phone rang at 2 a.m. Their oldest daughter, Rory, had left two weeks earlier for her first year at a college in Connecticut. An honor student and athlete, Rory had never been in trouble. They didn't think they had any reason to worry. "When I picked up the phone, Rory was crying hysterically; she was completely disoriented," Linda recalls. "She kept saying, 'Mom, can you come get me?' but she had no idea where she was—and we live hours away. I've never been that scared—she could barely speak." Finally, Linda heard other people's voices in the background and had Rory pass the phone to someone who told her where they were. While Linda stayed on the line with her daughter, her husband called campus security. When they found Rory a few minutes later, her face was covered in blood. She had fallen and broken her nose, though she was so intoxicated she hadn't realized it. "She managed to tell me she'd been drinking something called Jungle Juice," Linda recalls.

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Drinking in college is nothing new. Kegs and watered-down beer have long been as much a



part of the campus experience as trying to avoid early-morning classes. And it's not exactly unheard of for teens in high school and even middle school to sneak into their parents' liquor cabinets. But what is new—and increasingly alarming to those on the front lines—is the growing trend of extreme underage drinking. The concern this behavior is generating transcends any debate about whether the drinking age should remain 21, or the legalities involved.

“We’re seeing kids coming in with blood alcohol levels in the mid-.3s, even .4, which is four to five times the legal limit for driving. That’s the level at which 50 percent of people die,” says Dr. Mary Claire O’Brien, an emergency room physician and professor at Wake Forest University School of Medicine in North Carolina who specializes in alcohol-related research. “Ten years ago, we saw those levels only in people who were chronic alcoholics.”

Adolescents tend to drink differently from adults. Their goal is not to sit around enjoying a glass of wine or two over the course of an evening. Rather, for many teens, the point is to get as drunk as possible, as quickly and cheaply as possible, in part to reduce the social anxiety rife at that age. Unfortunately, there are now more—and more dangerous—ways to accomplish this than ever before. The rising practice of mixing alcohol with super-caffeinated energy drinks; the marketing of fruit-flavored malt beverages in 23.5-ounce cans, each containing the equivalent alcohol of close to five beers; a shift in preference away from beer to hard liquor; and the influence of social media have raised the stakes.

If you think it can't happen to your kids, think again. According to the CDC, about 90% of all teen alcohol consumption occurs in the form of binge-drinking, which, experts say, peaks at age 19. Forty-one percent of 12th graders report having had a drink in the previous 30 days, and by the time kids are in college, that number climbs to 72%. Approximately 200,000 adolescents visit emergency rooms each year for drinking-related incidents, and an estimated 1,700 college students die. “Underage drinking doesn't discriminate,” says Adrian Lopez, director of Commu-



FIGHTING BACK
Left, Attorney General Richard Blumenthal calls for a halt to alcoholic energy drink sales at a press conference in November 2010 in North Haven, Conn. Below, TKTKTKTK. Bottom, Four Loko for sale in a convenience store in Seattle, Wash., November 2010.

nity Outreach for the SoBeSober program for teens in Miami. “Whether you are an upper-middle-class, straight-A student or from an inner city, it impacts all demographics and communities. And it often peaks in May and June, when kids are celebrating proms and graduations. We call it ‘The Killing Season.’”

■ BLACKOUT IN A CAN

The craze for combining energy drinks, which have far more caffeine than coffee or cola, with alcohol is particularly troubling. Dr. O’Brien first became aware of the phenomenon in 2006 when a student was brought in near-comatose. “The caffeine blocks the part of alcohol that makes you sleepy and might otherwise cause you to pass out. This enables you to drink far more than you might have. By the time many of these kids get to the hospital, they have to be put temporarily on respirators because of depressed breathing.” Disturbed by what they were seeing, Dr. O’Brien and her colleagues conducted a survey later that year of 4,271 students from more than 10 universities in North Carolina. “The results were shocking. We found that about a quarter of the kids who had a drink in the past 30 days



said they were mixing alcohol with energy drinks, either the premixed kind or Red Bull and vodka. They got drunk twice as often and drank more per session than those who had alcohol without caffeine. They were much more likely to be injured, much more likely to be taken advantage of sexually or to take advantage of someone sexually, much more likely to drive drunk.”

Colleges have been particularly hard hit by the trend. Ramapo College in New Jersey banned energy drinks containing alcohol in 2010 after a number of students were hospitalized for alcohol-related incidents over the span of a few weeks. James L. Gaudino, president of Central Washington University in Ellensburg, Wash., took similar action. “We banned alcoholic energy drinks when we became aware of the extraordinary threat they pose,” Gaudino says. “What shocked us was the hospitalization of 11 students after a single party.”

As outrage grew, the FDA stepped in, and last year effectively ordered the makers of four

FROM TOP, PHOTOS: MARA LAVITT/NEW HAVEN REGISTER; ELAINE THOMPSON/AP PHOTO

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brands, including Phusion, which sells the cult favorite Four Loko, to remove the caffeine. Four Loko was reformulated and is now back on the market. The sweetened beverage no longer contains caffeine, but each 23.5-ounce can has the alcohol equivalent of four to five beers. (Four beers for a female and five for a male over a two-hour period is considered binge-drinking.) Its popularity shows no signs of abating. YouTube alone has more than 5,000 videos extolling Four Loko, a.k.a. "Blackout in a Can."

"Four Loko is everywhere," says Gabby K., 17, a high school junior in a small town in New



BINGE IN A CAN One 23.5-ounce can of Blast malt beverage contains the same amount of alcohol as 4.7 12-ounce beers.

Jersey. "It tastes really good, like candy, so you can drink a lot of it fast. It's pretty potent and it only costs around \$3 a can, so you don't have to waste money. It's a faster way to get drunk without having to deal with the taste of liquor."

Gabby notes that the cans look a lot like ice tea packaging. "It seems user-friendly," she says. The maker of Four Loko replies: "We are fully committed to doing our part to ensure that our products are consumed legally and responsibly. Phusion Projects' marketing message is clear: If you are under the age of 21, respect the law and do not drink."

Even in its new incarnation, Four Loko falls into a category of teen favorite that has authorities concerned: fruit-flavored malt beverages. Like Four Loko, most are sold in brightly decorated 23.5-ounce cans and have an alcohol content of 12%.

On April 21, attorneys general from 16 states co-signed a letter to Pabst, makers of Blast, a new member of the fruit-flavored group. "We believe the manufacture and marketing of this flavored 'binge in a can' poses a grave public safety threat," the letter states. It goes on to cite concerns that Blast—with such flavors as strawberry lemonade and grape, a pervasive online presence, and the rap star Snoop Dogg as a spokesman—is being aimed at underage drinkers. Jon Sayer, chief marketing officer of Pabst Brewing Company, issued this reply: "Blast is produced only for consumers above legal drinking age and is marketed as such."

■ DRINKING GAMES GO HARD-CORE

The growing preference among teens for hard liquor over beer is also setting off alarms. Dr. Michael Siegel, professor at the Boston University School of Public Health, recently completed a study on the drinking habits of high school students. "We found that, by far, liquor is the beverage of choice. This definitely represents a change."

Hard liquor is increasingly replacing beer in popular drinking games. "Kids easily drink seven or eight shots at a time," Gabby says of her high school buddies. "That's low ballpark, from what we are seeing," Dr. O'Brien says. "Teens in our studies are having 10 or more drinks."


Helene F., a junior in college in Colorado, explains the appeal: "Everyone's so much friendlier after a couple of drinks. It takes the pressure off. And if you



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want to get drunk quickly, shots are your key. It goes down quicker and you get drunk faster. There's a sense that you need to be wasted to go to a party, and, if you're  continued on page.12

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not, you won't have fun. Certain weekends and events, like Halloween and Homecoming, it's kind of guaranteed that kids are going to end up in hospitals." After 14 students were hospitalized during a single graduation celebration in 2008, Colby College in Maine studied the issue and, in 2010, banned hard liquor on most of the campus, including dorms.

■ THE LONG-TERM DAMAGE

"The adolescent brain is much more sensitive to alcohol toxicity than adults', including being

vulnerable to cell death," says Dr. Fulton Crews, director of the Bowles Center for Alcohol Studies at the University of North Carolina School of Medicine. "Adolescents showed much more frontal cortical damage than adults. We found that one high dose of alcohol caused significant loss of brain stem cells."

Early drinking also poses a risk of alcoholism later in life. "If you start drinking early, say, age 13, you're 40 to 60 percent more likely to become an alcoholic, regardless of family history," Dr. Crews says. Research also indicates a potential for permanent memory impairment.

■ WHAT PARENTS CAN DO

1 Know the Warning Signs. Signs of extreme drinking include a drop in grades, change in behavior and mood, a change in friends, memory lapses, and difficulty concentrating.

2 Open a Dialogue. Ask your kids what kinds of experiences they're having, make your personal values clear, and calmly lay out the risks. Studies have found that parents who combine clear expectations of accountability with support and warmth have more success in curbing binge-drinking than either strictly authoritarian or overly indulgent parents.

3 Establish a Code Word. Before your kids go out, agree on a phrase they can say if they are in an uncomfortable situation and need to give you a signal to come get them right away, no questions asked.

4 If You Tell Your Kids Just One Thing, Make It This ... "If someone has been drinking Jungle Juice or doing shots in a short amount of time, their blood alcohol level can continue to rise dangerously after they appear to fall asleep," Dr. O'Brien points out. This is how kids die. "Tell your kids: If you can't rouse someone, call 911. The worst that can happen is you'll be embarrassed or your parents will get angry. But the alternative is far worse. We all know kids make mistakes. Unfortunately, some mistakes can't be fixed." ■



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