

Alcohol, kids, and cancer

Making the connection



You probably already know underage drinking puts our kids at risk. Not just for dangerous situations. Heavy drinking can lead to serious physical and mental health issues, too. But did you know that drinking alcohol also increases a person's risk of cancer?

It's true. The more alcohol a person drinks and the earlier in life they start, the higher their risk of cancer can climb. That makes underage drinking a serious issue for Wisconsin kids. Ninety percent of underage drinking is binge drinking. You can protect your child's health by helping them understand the link between alcohol and cancer.

What if I mess it up?

You can't. Having a lot of talks (even do-overs) is the point. Every attempt shows kids you care and are paying attention.

Start with a small talk

Small talks about the dangers of underage drinking can make a big difference in a kid's choices. That's because kids really do listen. Research shows having many short, casual talks with your child, starting around age 8, is best. Especially when they happen often. So start talking and keep listening. You'll help give a kid the confidence to grow up alcohol-free and reduce their risk for cancer.

Give them the facts

The more a person drinks over their lifetime, the higher their risk for cancer.

Alcohol can increase the risk of at least seven types of cancer.

Approximately 20,000 cancer deaths in the U.S. each each year are attributed to alcohol use.

Answering their tough questions

When you start having small talks with your child about underage drinking and cancer, you may get asked some tough questions. It's important to stay calm, be honest, and try not to scare them. Here are some common questions your child may ask, along with suggestions on how to respond.

“What is cancer?”

Tell them cancer is an illness that has to do with our cells. *“Cells are the very tiny building blocks that make up all living things. There are billions of cells in each person’s body. Healthy cells grow and divide, and know when to stop growing. But cancer cells continue to grow and divide and don’t die when they’re supposed to.”* You may want to add: *“Cancer cells usually group or clump together to form tumors. A growing tumor can damage the normal cells in a person’s body. This can make a person very sick. Sometimes, people with cancer die.”*

“What causes cancer?”

Explain to children that cancer happens for many different reasons, but doctors know that some behaviors can increase a person’s risk. Tell them: *“Some habits, like using tobacco, eating unhealthy foods, or drinking too much alcohol can make a person a lot more likely to get cancer when they grow older.”* Make sure kids know that cancer isn’t contagious, which means they can’t catch it from someone who has it.

“Why does drinking alcohol increase the risk of cancer?”

Explain how the body breaks down what we eat and drink. Usually, the result is vitamins, minerals, and other things that help us grow. *“But in our bodies, alcohol turns it into a dangerous, cancer-causing chemical called acetaldehyde.”* (That’s pronounced “as-i-tal-duh-hide”). *“The more alcohol a person drinks, the more damage that chemical can do as it builds up in their body.”*

Want to learn more?

The Wisconsin Cancer Collaborative and Wisconsin Department of Health Services are coming together to raise awareness about underage drinking and its associated cancer risk.

Visit SmallTalksWI.org to find underage drinking facts and tips for taking action. Working within your community to reduce alcohol use at any age? Visit WICancer.org/alcohol for helpful resources.

“You drink alcohol. Will you get cancer?”

Help children understand that, while any amount of alcohol can increase a person’s risk of cancer, the risk is much greater for people who drink heavily, binge drink, or started drinking at an early age. Consider saying: *“Grown-ups who drink a little are at much lower risk for cancer than people who drink a lot or start when they’re too young. That’s one of the reasons I’m careful not to drink too much. It’s also why I want you to wait until you’re old enough to try alcohol.”*

“Why do I need to wait until I’m 21 to drink?”

Let children know there are several reasons why people under 21 should not drink, including:

- It’s against the law.
- Drinking can change the way your growing brain works. It can affect your memory, ability to learn, and cause depression or anxiety.
- Underage drinking can lead to cancer, stroke, heart disease, and liver disease.
- Kids who try alcohol before they turn 15 are four times more likely to develop alcohol use disorder.
- Alcohol affects your ability to make good choices.

“I’ve already had alcohol. Am I going to get cancer?”

Start by thanking your child for being honest with you. Then let them know their risk will be very low if they stop drinking alcohol now. If the time is right, ask your child why they chose to drink and how it happened. This can help you give them the tools to avoid underage drinking in the future.