

New research shows increased dangers for adolescent drinkers

By ANNA KOMOR

Having been through multiple health classes over the years, most high school students are aware of the dangers of drinking alcohol. Most students know that alcohol impairs judgment, balance, coordination, and the senses, and that the loss of these skills can lead to risky behavior such as driving while impaired, high-risk sex, and increased susceptibility to sexual harassment. New research has shown however that alcohol has an especially damaging effect on the adolescent brain, with consequences potentially far more injurious and long lasting than those caused by a temporary lapse of judgment.

Alcohol impacts adolescents much more severely than adults, the research finds, because the adolescent brain undergoes a tremendous amount of structural and functional development. Specifically in the frontal lobes, which are responsible for a myriad of functions, including decision making, judgment, memory and problem solving, the adolescent brain is in a constant state of flux, creating millions

of connections between nerve cells. Babies are born with far more neurons than are present in an adult brain. Neurons that do not make meaningful connections with each other are eventually destroyed, lost forever to that person. Similar selection processes are also occurring in the hippocampus and cerebellum of a teenager's brain at this time, the parts of the brain responsible for the formation of new memories and motor skills, respectively.

This is important because one of the primary effects of alcohol is a reduction in the ability to create connections between neurons. Alcohol is effectively a toxin that disrupts the chemical balance of the brain, upsetting the chemical messengers responsible for neural plasticity, the ability of brain circuitry to rearrange itself as a result of experience.

How much one drinks is directly related to how much memory impairment one will experience. While a drink or two may make it difficult to remember a new acquaintance's name, binge drinking—defined as consuming five or more drinks consecutively, a style of drinking

practiced by many teenage drinkers—will have much more drastic effects: you might not only forget you met the acquaintance, but that you were even at the party to begin with. This is called alcoholic blackout, where a person is fully awake and participating in often complicated actions such as carrying on a conversation or driving, but dangerously unaware that not all of his brain is functioning.

Many drinkers are under the false assumption that provided they take certain precautions, such as not driving drunk or engaging in unprotected sex, the nefarious effects of their binge drinking will fade with their hangover. Studies have shown that adolescents who drank frequently (100 or more times) in high school showed lapses in memory, learning and visuospatial functioning up to eight years later, into their mid-twenties. Other studies that have measured oxygen levels in the brains of adults who abused alcohol as teenagers, found that the oxygen level—and therefore the brain activity—while performing a memory test, was much lower in alcohol abusers as compared to non-abusers.

If you choose to drink despite the potential legal ramifications, there are ways to protect yourself and your brain now and into the future. Never drink and drive even if you feel like you are able; remember, your judgment and your motor skills have been impaired. Says one police officer, "Either their brain is going 10 miles-an-hour and their car is going 100, or their brain is going 100 miles-an-hour and their brain is going 10, but either way we're going to catch 'em."

If you must drink, try to drink in a safe place where you are with people who will monitor your behavior. Spread out the drinking, and don't drink on an empty stomach. Though experts generally agree that there is no safe level at which teenagers can drink, if you keep it within the legal limit, you will do minimal damage. To calculate how many drinks brings you up to .08, go to "The Police Notebook BAC Calculator" at <http://www.ou.edu/oupd/bac.htm>.

Special thanks to Dr. Alan Berkowitz for his input on drinking responsibly.

Temptation on the hill IHS students and Frat parties

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go to Cornell, I see all these high school students. I don't want to see them, I want to see Cornell people!" Taylor Hughes '07 said, "I know so many people that go, especially juniors and seniors."

Most everyone agrees that it is easy for an IHS student to get into fraternities, although not all frats are the same. "At some frats, you can walk right in the back door, but at others, there are security guards at all the doors," said Alison Cacciotti '05. However, some students have devised a way around doormen at frats. "If you know one person from that frat, you get in like that," said one senior, snapping his fingers in emphasis.

Another agreed, saying, "I make friends with the bouncers, and then they let you in every time."

In almost all cases, everyone agreed that female high school students had a much easier time of getting in than men. "You must have at least a 2:1 girl-to-guy ratio [to get in the frat]," said a junior. "They'll let any girl in," said another.

Brian Scrahine, the Assistant Dean for Fraternity and Sorority Affairs at Cornell University, said he didn't have "any idea how many high school students are up here" on any given night, but he added, "I do know that local Ithaca residents come to the parties." He explained

that for fraternities and sororities at Cornell, there are three types of parties; non-alcoholic, BYOB, and catered events. For the second and third, he said it is "in the social guidelines that someone should be checking both Cornell I.D.s and driver's licenses" at the door, and that there is also supposed to be a guest list with names and ages of all prospective party-goers.

"We have worked hard to put a stop to underage drinking," said Scrahine. "We're working harder to make sure they're following these policies but it is very hard for us to monitor these things

one, it is against the law, and two, it puts people at risk."

Eric Goldstein, immediate past president of Lambda Ki Alpha fraternity at Cornell, said that the occurrence of high school students attending their parties was "next to none that I know of—we usually check for Cornell I.D. at the door." However, he also pointed out that fraternities that let high school students in "probably aren't on the best standing" with the Office of Affairs, which referred *The Tattler* to Goldstein. Goldstein said that every fall, Cornell runs a training session for fraternity presidents on how to spot fake I.D.s and tell if a person has had too much to drink, as well as other things that could help fraternities identify high school students. He pointed out that if a fraternity is caught serving alcohol to a minor, "the president can get arrested, and the party obviously gets shut down." Punishment can come from normal courts or the Cornell Greek route, where the case is tried before a panel of peers. The smallest consequence would be "two months social probation," meaning that that fraternity couldn't have any parties for a two-month period.

Most of the IHS students who said they go to frat parties regularly (once or twice a month during the school year) said that they started going around their sophomore or junior year. When asked why he went to frat parties, one sophomore responded, "Because there's kegs there." Easy access to alcohol is the main

incentive for most IHS frat parties. "I have never seen any [high school student] denied alcohol," said one IHS senior. "I believe you'd get slapped for something like that." Jessica Reynolds '07, who has never attended a frat party, said "[Students who go] are tempted to go to them, because they know what's going to be there."

Dana Billings '05 said he has been to a frat party only once in his stay at IHS. "If you know someone, you can get in," he said. "It would have been very easy to get alcohol; it was all over the place."

However, free booze isn't the only reason IHS students go to frat parties. "We go to dance and meet college guys," said one female senior. "You can get drunk with your friends by yourself," said another. "At high school parties, there's no dancing." A lot of IHS females suggested that they would be afraid of date rape at a fraternity. "I don't go to frats; I don't want to get drugged," said Tida Lay '06. "I bring my own alcohol," said another concerned IHS senior.

However, not every IHS student goes to fraternities to have fun. "I don't even think about frat parties," said Sophie Strang '07. "It's not an option. There are a lot of other things you can do." One sophomore said, "You can't get in if you don't have an I.D., and I don't look 21." Many other IHS students agreed that frat parties weren't the best place to spend a weekend night. "Frat parties are full of douche bag college guys that only want girls to get in," said one junior. "I think frat parties are weird; you have all these awkward college freshmen with no social skills preying on drunk teenagers," said another senior.

o p i n i o n

POINT/COUNTERPOINT: Drinking

Why I Drink

Sometimes people ask me why I drink. The answer never is the same. I tell them it's because of the social benefits of drinking, because I like feeling the buzz, or because I just like the drinks. Maybe it's really a little bit of all of that. Or maybe it was another reason entirely.

I started doing serious drinking every now and then with friends back in 10th grade. Then it was mostly just because I was curious and because my friends were curious as well. I liked beer and eventually got a taste for vodka. I loved the good times, and I forgot the bad ones. I was never happier than when I would walk in and crack open that first beer at a party.

Some of the funniest things that I've known have occurred when I was out drinking with my friends, things that I would never look back and change even for an instant. In part I drink for those good times and so that they continue. Now don't get me wrong, I don't drink because it's the only way to have a good time, but because it's another way to have a good time. Just like snowboarding, watching a movie, or playing a pick-up game of baseball, drinking is just another way to have a good time with other people.

So you may now be asking what is the real reason that I drink? There may be all these different benefits of drinking but not one of them is my reason. You may think drinking is an escape, but I don't see it that way. For me drinking is a reality, just as much an escape as going for a walk or talking on a cell phone. Why do I drink? Simply put, I drink because I want to. I drink because I can.

—Name Withheld



It was a Friday evening and I was at home, sprawled out shirtless in my expensive Italian leather chair, watching another painful Metro home loss. Between hopeless boredom, and the freezing cold weather outside, I was at the brink of falling into a major depression. Picking myself up, I struggled to my phone. Eventually I got in touch with J. I began feeling reasonably happy.

Fast-forward an hour. A ring on my doorbell awoke me from my 3rd reading of *The New Yorker*. I walked to the door, fully dressed to roll. Behind him the van drives back down the street.

"Someone just stole your van", I mentioned. "My mom needs the van to go to work," he explained. "This sucks," I fumed. "I just listened to Eric Wynalda and Rob Stone for two fking hours in a row, there is no van, it's raining. I can't get in touch with anyone else, and there are no awesome parties. Alcohol is our only Saving Grace."

Soaked with water, we trudged off to Collegenetown. At least we had \$20 to spend, which would be enough for American piss-beer and a tip. We

Eating Beats Heavy Drinking

I've never thrown up on myself only to discover a few hours later what I had done. And I'm proud of it. Maybe I'm just a bit weird for not seeing the allure of perpetual (and sometimes projectile) vomiting, possibly a broken bone or two (we all know drunks are clumsy), and maybe even a little bit of poisoning all for the sake of a buzz.

Now, I don't stay away from alcohol because it's "morally wrong." Hell, who really cares about morals when it comes to something like underage drinking? What I do care about is practicality.

Booze costs money. I don't have money. No teenager has money. I'd rather buy food—something that I will remember the next day—if I did have money. I still remember every piece of food that I've eaten today, and I most vividly remember what I last had—two hours, thirty-seven minutes, and 5 seconds ago. That was one hot plate of wings. If you've had experience drinking, have you ever remembered what drink you started with and what you ended with? Probably not. Let's not even get into the umpteen "middle" drinks either. I like to enjoy what I'm consuming. I also like to remember it.

Now, I'm sure that some of you drinkers out there are thinking, "This guy is missing the point. I drink to forget, not to remember! Partay on!" If that's so, then odds are, you're probably making your problems worse. I mean really, imbibing a potentially deadly substance in order to numb your brain into peaceful coexistence with venomous thoughts is one strange way to deal with problems. I don't know. I'm not a doctor. It's just a hunch. Actually, if you really feel compelled to completely render your mind and body completely useless, you probably should seek professional help.

Ah, and now we're on to the whole idea of social acceptance. No, I'm not talking about peer pressure (much). Some people drink because it's what everyone's doing at the party, and hell, one won't hurt. Again, we circle back to the whole idea of practicality. Think about it logically. Even if you do manage to be the life of the party, you'll only hear bits and pieces about it the next day. Is that really how you want to enter the social limelight? "Dude, look at him go! Two at once! That's abso-freaking-lutely amazing!"

In all honesty, drinkers, get a hobby, and make it one you can remember.

—Scott Zuccarino '07

A Friday with alcohol

I waited in anticipation at a corner outside of a convenience store, waiting for someone old to pass. The first 30 minutes flew by and nobody. Finally, at the end of the street, a pair of ragged and stressed out students appeared. Perfect. I casually asked if they were 21. They hung their heads and said no, and my heart dropped. After one more step, one turned around and mentioned that he had a fake ID. Our night finally

had a purpose. The gods had intervened to insure that everything

worked out. After the guy dropped off a 30-pack of "Stones," I picked it up, and walked to a far-off apartment. I barely noticed as a cop's cruiser rolled past. When I knocked on the apartment door, L. swung it open. We walked in oblivious to the drug scene around us, and started slamming beers. After seven, everything started turning into an incoherent mess. A huge bag of grass was on the table before me, and bowls were being passed liberally. Money was trading hands everywhere. I had no idea what was happening, but it seemed natural. I did start to feel a bit awkward when a small bag of coke was thrown on the table, and people started divvying it into lines on a

CD case. I had never done coke before, and had no incentive to try it; I felt like I was intruding. Another beer or two and that feeling was taken care of. J. started asking the drug dealers sarcastic questions, and then made fun of one's Ecco jacket. Things were getting ugly.

We also had the option of next door, where J. had gotten me and a few other kids thrown out the previous weekend. After putting one kid in a headlock, and making fun of second, J. asked if a kid I'll call N. was going to be a Rabbi after he kept preaching to us. It was the first—and probably the last—time I'll see a Jewish kid kicked out of a party for being 'anti-Semitic.'

Luckily, someone from next door dropped by just then, and invited us over to a party. We first came up with a plan of action. The people who threw us out were there, and we needed to make a good impression. The two of us slammed another beer, walked in there, and started hugging everyone in sight, saying 'sorry.' I woke up on their couch the next day at 2 p.m., with a headache and a dry throat, and J. nowhere in sight. My undershirt is soaked with cheap beer, my regular shirt is gone, my hair is everywhere, and I'm teetering all over the road as I try and walk home. As I pass families on their Sunday strolls, they move to the other side of the street.

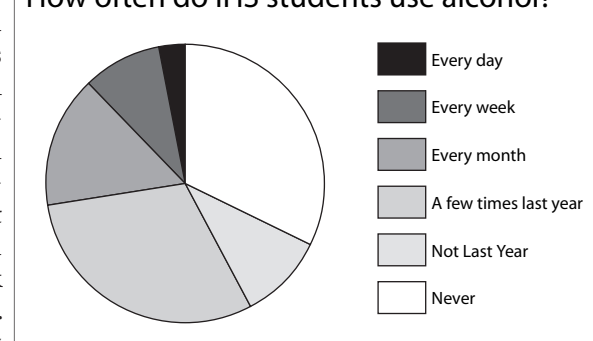
—Name Withheld

Social Norms program about the facts

By ANNA KOMOR

The data for the graphs comes from the 2003 Student Life and Culture Survey, administered biannually to middle and high school students in the Ithaca City School District. The survey, designed in collaboration with the

How often do IHS students use alcohol?



school district by Dr. Alan Berkowitz, is part of a social norms campaign to both asses and reduce student participation in high risk behaviors. Dr. Berkowitz is one of two forerunners of the social norms approach, a methodology of collecting and disseminating data about health problems and high-risk behaviors such as substance abuse, which has proven successful in reducing the involvement in those behaviors.

The social norms approach relies on the fact that people, especially students, are influenced by the actions of their peers, and more importantly, what students think the actions of their peers include. By disseminating correct information, data that rejects the misconception that "everyone is doing it", and students feel more comfortable making their own informed choices about risky behavior.

"Locally and nationally, research shows that most high school students don't use alcohol, and those that do, use responsibly," says Berkowitz. The data from the IHS is consistent with that research. For example, although only nine percent of students actually use alcohol weekly, students believe that 35 percent are using alcohol weekly.

The numbers themselves can also be misleading when taken out of context. For example, 67 percent of IHS students surveyed said they have used alcohol, a percentage which sounds high. However, 30 percent of those have only used it "a few times in the last year" and 10 percent "a few times but not in the last year," leaving only 28 percent of students who use alcohol monthly, weekly, or daily.

These misconceptions develop because, in part, extreme behavior is sensationalized. No one is going to remember, or even know, that you and all your friends spent spring break completely sober, but everyone will remember the story of Joe Brown's drunken rant through college town, or Sally White passing out at Stuart Park after having too much to drink. Even among the students who do frequent parties, the

students getting drunk are usually in the minority, says Berkowitz, because you have a small number of people drinking a large percentage of the alcohol.

Another important aspect of the social norms campaign that isn't addressed directly by the survey, but is still essential to reducing risky behaviors and the injuries that can ensue, is making students feel comfortable expressing concern. If a fellow student is acting in ways that makes you uncomfortable or concerned about his safety or the safety of others around him, chances are you won't say anything no one else seems bothered by the behavior. According to Berkowitz

could also be very dangerous, if an impaired individual insists on driving, or decides to leave the party with an unsavory character.

"Youth are always getting trashed because everyone calls attention to extreme behavior, but what we have is a lot of people talking about a few people," says Berkowitz. "The great thing about this [approach] is that the truth is better than people think."

For a full copy of the 2003 survey results, contact Nancy Zabler at the Ithaca Community Drug Task Force. The 2005 survey results will be available to the public in a few weeks.

How old were you the first time you got drunk?
Note: 49% of students have never been drunk

