THE LAW

Getting a driver’s license is one of the highlights of being a teenager, but underage drinking can affect your driving privileges.

If you are convicted of lying about your age to get alcohol; carrying a false ID; and/or purchasing, consuming, possessing, attempting to purchase or transporting alcohol, you may face fines and lose your driving privilege for at least 90 days. If you don’t have a driver’s license at the time of the conviction, you won’t be able to apply for a learner’s permit until the suspension is over. If you’re under 16, the suspension will start on your 16th birthday.

The Zero Tolerance Law reduced the blood alcohol content (BAC) required to charge minors (under age 21) with driving under the influence to 0.02 percent. In addition to license suspension, consequences could include: fines; fees; a criminal record; drug and alcohol assessment; required attendance at alcohol highway safety school; participation in victim impact panels where victims, surviving family members, and former offenders speak about the consequences of drunken driving; community service; and/or imprisonment. You will also face underage drinking charges and penalties.
One of the nice things about being a teen is having more freedom. You can stay out later, earn your own money, buy your own clothes, and even drive a car! With all this new-found freedom comes more responsibility. You get to make your own decisions now. It’s hard to imagine, but a lot of the decisions you make today could affect your life for years to come.

When facing a decision, knowing all the facts can steer you in the right direction. Choosing not to drink alcohol before you’re 21 may be a difficult decision, but it is the safest, healthiest, and only legal choice to make. Underage drinkers risk not only their own health and well-being, but they can hurt their family, friends, and others.

ALCOHOL’S EFFECTS

The chemicals in alcohol go straight into your blood, where they are carried to the rest of your body. Here are some things that alcohol affects:

**Brain:** Alcohol can damage your brain cells, making it harder to learn and remember new information. Alcohol in your system will mess up your coordination, vision, balance, reflexes, and concentration.

**Heart:** Alcohol can overwork the heart. This can lead to high blood pressure and heart disease.

**Liver:** The liver keeps your blood clean and healthy, but too much alcohol can damage it. People who drink too much can develop liver diseases, including cirrhosis — a life-threatening condition in which the liver can’t do its job anymore.

**Stomach:** Alcohol can upset your stomach and cause you to throw up. Heavy drinkers can develop stomach ulcers and problems digesting their food.

**Cancer:** Studies done by the American Cancer Society have shown evidence that heavy alcohol use can cause at least eight different types of cancer.

Injuries: Because alcohol impairs the coordination and judgment necessary for everyday activities, its use is involved in a high percentage of falls, drownings, burns, other injuries, and deaths.

Violence: Alcohol clouds judgment and reasonable thinking, sometimes leading to violence. A significant number of violent crimes among students — including rape, robbery, and assault — have been shown to involve alcohol.

A survey of college administrators indicates that more than half of campus incidents, ranging from property damage to more violent behavior, were directly related to alcohol use.

**Emotional Problems:** Alcohol affects your emotions. Negative feelings, such as loneliness and hopelessness, may become worse. Emotionally troubled youth who drink are at a higher risk for attempted suicide.

**Stress:** Drinking alcohol to deal with life’s stressors can cause emotional, family, academic, and legal problems that only add to the stress you are trying to manage by drinking.

**Overdose:** Consuming too much alcohol over a short period of time can cause death from alcohol poisoning.

**Risky Behaviors:** Impaired judgment caused by alcohol consumption can lead to risky sexual behavior, which can result in unplanned pregnancy and/or sexually transmitted diseases such as HIV/AIDS.

**DRINKING & DRIVING DO NOT MIX, ESPECIALLY UNDERAGE!**

Drinking and driving is a deadly combination. Think about all the skills it takes to drive a car: coordination, balance, concentration, reflexes, vision, reason, and judgment. Alcohol affects every one of these skills. Look at the facts:

- In 2015, there were 10,265 fatalities in motor vehicle traffic crashes involving drivers with BACs of .08 or higher. This totaled 29 percent of all traffic fatalities for the year.
- The estimated economic cost of all alcohol-impaired-driving crashes in the United States in 2010 (the most recent year for which cost data is available) was $44 billion.
- An average of 1 alcohol-impaired driving fatality occurred every 51 minutes in 2015!

**WHY DO I HAVE TO WAIT UNTIL I AM 21?**

One reason not to drink alcohol underage is that it is illegal. Another is because the brain grows and develops until we are about 25 years old. When a developing brain is affected by alcohol, over time it can slow down this development and make it harder to learn and remember new information.

1. National Highway Safety Administration, 2015

**FITTING IN WITHOUT ALCOHOL**

Teens who drink often use peer pressure as a reason. But remember: part of maturing is taking responsibility for your own actions.

- Focus on the positive things in your life. Develop your talents and spend time doing healthy activities you enjoy.
- Think through the situation. You might be tempted to act first and deal with it later, but taking those extra few minutes to think about the consequences may help you make a lifesaving decision.

- Choose your friends carefully. A true friend would not pressure you to do anything you don’t want to do — especially if you could get into trouble. Although some people might claim “everybody drinks,” it’s not true.
- Check out this interactive website www.thecoolspot.gov for information on alcohol and resisting peer pressure.