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Contact *First Draft*

For more information...

Editor in Chief:  
Brian Dyak

Editors:  
Marie Gallo Dyak  
Diane Miller

Writer & Editor:  
David Michael Conner

Design & Production:  
Output Printing

**Spotlight on... Underage Drinking**  
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**NIAAA**

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## Youth: A Critical Window to Alcoholism



Many young people are experiencing the consequences of drinking too much, at too early an age. Teens and college students are often seen drinking and partying onscreen—traditionally, the context is at house, frat or sorority parties, and it's all in good fun. Underage drinking can be tragic, and needs to be shown to be part of a larger problem. But young people are rarely seen as truly addicted alcoholics in the way that Meg Ryan's *PRISM* Award-winning character was in *When a Man Loves a Woman*, or the similar way Nicholas Cage's Oscar-winning performance in *Leaving Las Vegas* showed the decimation that chronic alcoholism can cause.

*"We can no longer address alcohol dependence exclusively as a disease of middle age. Instead, we now believe that youth represents a critical window of opportunity for understanding, preventing and treating alcoholism."*

—NIAAA Associate Director Mark Goldman, Ph.D.

*Spotlight on... Underage Drinking* focuses on the consequences of youth drinking, from physical injury to social consequences. It also illustrates what can come of addressing youth alcoholism and alcohol abuse, dispelling myths like the idea that the genetic inheritance of alcoholism traits means that a young person is *destined* to become addicted to alcohol. *Risk is not destiny*, and early intervention and prevention is the best way to disprove the myth.



## Developing a Taste for Alcohol: Younger Than You Think

Scientists now have a better understanding of alcohol consumption during adolescence and young adulthood. Current information suggests that alcohol abuse and dependence are developmental disorders, with consequences that may play out over the individual's life span.<sup>1</sup>

### What does that really mean?

According to NIAAA, "significant changes occur in the body during adolescence, including rapid hormonal alterations and the formation of new neural networks in the brain. Adolescence is also a time for trying new experiences and activities that emphasize socializing with peers and conforming to peer-group standards. These new activities may place young people at particular risk for initiating and continuing alcohol consumption. Exposing the brain to alcohol during this period may interfere with important developmental processes and possibly result in short- and/or long-term cognitive impairment. It may also increase the risk for alcohol dependence."

### What does that really mean TO YOU?

What it means is that, in order to depict young people's drinking habits accurately—to give the most realistic scenario, and to resonate best with your audiences, you'll be ahead of everyone else if you take these factors into account when writing, directing and acting scenes involving underage drinking. Young people are more and more aware of their own actions, and they are more and more adept at noticing when their on-screen peers are not acting the way they do.

## Spotlight on Depiction

Here are some specific points to consider:

- Increased stress in young people's lives may increase their likelihood not only to *try* alcohol, but to develop long-term dependence on it.
- Young people with alcoholic family members are often aware of their increased risk of drinking—but remember that *risk is not destiny*. Think about showing young characters making conscious decisions not to drink, especially when they know it could be a problem.
- It isn't clear whether starting to drink at an early age actually causes alcoholism or whether it simply indicates an existing vulnerability to alcohol use disorders. Consider environmental factors, especially of family members and peers—including positive relationships. Also consider physiologic and psychiatric factors—this may be a point where you would want to consult an expert by way of a free call to *First Draft*.



## This Just In...

New Survey Reveals Highest Rates of Diagnosable Alcohol Disorders in Young Adults. The *National Epidemiologic Survey on Alcohol and Related Conditions* (NESARC), a survey of Americans aged 18 and over, reveals that "alcohol disorder rates are highest among young adults [and] underscores the need for concerted research on drinking patterns that start in youth," according to NIAAA Director Dr. Ting-Kai Li. Alcohol research will be affected by this new study, taking into greater consideration the significant numbers of young people who abuse or who are addicted to alcohol.

## Special Screening: The Role of the Doctor

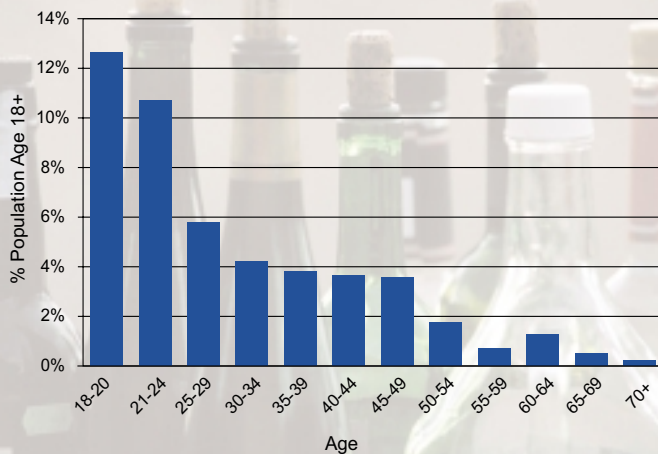


Especially in medical shows and episodes involving medical situations, consider showing a doctor—and especially a pediatrician—asking his or her patient about their drinking and drug use. As in real life, make a point of reinforcing the doctor-patient confidentiality that is involved with such a discussion. A 12 year-old child may well recognize her own drinking problem, but be afraid to discuss it with her parent; a doctor would then present the perfect, non-judgmental opportunity to deal with the problem. Conversely, a child may have concerns about his “destiny” to become an alcoholic because his parent is addicted to alcohol. While he may not be able to discuss this with the parent, a pediatrician would be a positive influence. The doctor could explain to the child that he may indeed be more likely to become addicted to alcohol, but that it is not his *fate*. The pediatrician could provide resources for prevention, including the doctor’s role as a confidant for such discussions in case the child continues to worry or “slips up” and does become involved with drinking. Identifying the problem early might solve it before it happens.

## Just the Facts: Statistics on Underage Drinking

- Alcohol is the drug of choice among youth. (Yes, alcohol is classified as a drug, not a beverage.)<sup>2</sup>
- Underage alcohol use is more likely to kill young people than all illegal drugs combined.<sup>2</sup>

### Alcohol Dependence By Age<sup>5</sup>



The prevalence of alcohol dependence is highest in the 18-20 and 21-24 year old groups. These kids don’t just party.

- Alcohol may cause subtle learning impairments that could affect academic and occupational achievement.<sup>2</sup>
- Social factors such as peer pressure play a large role in relapse among adolescents.<sup>2</sup>
- Youth often overestimate how much their peers drink.<sup>2</sup>
- Persons reporting first use of alcohol before age 15 were five times more likely to report alcohol dependence or abuse than persons who first used alcohol at age 21 or older.<sup>3</sup>
- In 2002, 1.5 million youth ages 12-17 met criteria for admission to alcohol treatment.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup>National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, National Institutes of Health. Understanding Underage Drinking, NIH publication NIH-04-5465; September 2004. Available at: <http://www.niaaa.nih.gov>.

<sup>2</sup>National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, National Institutes of Health. *Alcohol Alert*, 59; April 2003. Available at: <http://www.niaaa.nih.gov>.

<sup>3</sup>Office of Applied Studies, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. Results from the 2002 National Survey on Drug Use and Health: National Findings. 2003. Available at: <http://www.oas.samhsa.gov/2k4/ageDependence/ageDependence.cfm>.

<sup>4</sup>Office of Applied Studies, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. Results from the 2002 National Survey on Drug Use and Health: National Findings. 2003. Available at: <http://www.oas.samhsa.gov/nhsda/2k2nsduh/Results/2k2Results.htm>.

<sup>5</sup>Grant, B.F. et al. Prevalence of past-year DSM-IV alcohol dependence: United States, 2001-2002. *Drug and Alcohol Dependence*, vol. 74, 223-34; 2004.



For more information on alcohol abuse and alcoholism, also visit NIAAA's website at [www.niaaa.nih.gov](http://www.niaaa.nih.gov).

**NIAAA's Mission** NIAAA provides leadership in the national effort to reduce alcohol-related problems by conducting and supporting research in a wide range of scientific areas including genetics, neuroscience, epidemiology, health risks and benefits of alcohol consumption, prevention, and treatment; coordinating and collaborating with other research institutes and Federal Programs on alcohol-related issues; collaborating with international, national, state, and local institutions, organizations, agencies, and programs engaged in alcohol-related work; translating and disseminating research findings to health care providers, researchers, policy-makers, and the public.

**EIC's Mission** For 21 years, the Entertainment Industries Council, Inc. has worked to bring the power and influence of the entertainment industry to bear on health and social issues. EIC does this through its three-tiered model of providing education, resources and recognition.



**EIC East** • 1760 Reston Parkway, Suite 415 • Reston, VA 20190-3303 • v. (703)481-1414 • f. (703)481-1418 • [eiceast@eiconline.org](mailto:eiceast@eiconline.org)

**EIC West** • 10635 Santa Monica Blvd., Suite 100 • Los Angeles, CA 90025-8300 • v. (310) 446-7818 • f. (310) 446-7819 • [eicwest@eiconline.org](mailto:eicwest@eiconline.org)



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