

But It's Just a Beer!

By Joseph M. Considine, P.A.

One of the more worrisome aspects of raising children is the fear that they might be drinking alcohol or using drugs. **Many of us think that it's okay if teens have the occasional beer so long as they're not driving or getting too crazy. Let me caution you about that.** While moderate drinking can be safe for adults, underage drinking is a serious matter. By underage, I mean drinking by anyone under 21 years of age. As a professional in the field I'm seeing more and more young people finding their way into recovery from addiction through the Marchman Act. Along with addiction to heroin and other opiates, alcohol plays a role in many young lives. Parents need to be aware of the downside of teenage drinking.

It is hugely important to understand that alcohol is a gateway drug to powerful drugs like opiates, vicodan, heroin and other narcotics.

The immediate risks and harm a youngster may experience from drinking alcohol are heavy duty and include:

- * increased likelihood of automobile crashes;
- * death from alcohol poisoning (excessive drinking);
- * violent behavior or become the victim of violent crime;
- * unprotected sex
- * depression and anxiety.

“Oh, the occasional beer won't hurt my kid.” Or will it?

The occasional beer might not be harmful to you and your friends. However, when it comes to underage drinking there are some serious factors to consider.

1. Youngsters might say they're just having a beer once in awhile, but peer pressure among teens is huge and that occasional beer can too often end up being quite a few more. The average teen has a major challenge saying no to the kids he or she is trying to impress, to the group.
2. Development of the human brain is not complete until about the age of 24 or 25. A number of reports and studies indicate that drinking by young adults (anyone under 25 years of age) can have serious long-term consequences. It is now understood that the human brain is still developing and growing until the mid-20's. Heavy drinking before the brain has fully developed can cause several long-lasting problems.

A recent study by neuroscientist Susan Tapert of the University of California, San Diego compared the brain scans of teens who drink heavily with the scans of teens who don't. The researchers found damaged nerve tissue in the brains of the teens who drank. It is believed that this damage negatively affects attention span in boys, and girls' ability to comprehend and interpret visual information.

And, according to scientists in the area of pediatrics and adolescent medicine, the earlier a child drinks the more likely that young person is to become addicted.