



Minimum Drinking Age 21 SADD Q & A

1. Why does SADD oppose a discussion of this issue? Doesn't SADD see that something is wrong?

SADD does not oppose discussion of this topic. In fact, SADD has been urging increased national attention to the issue of underage and binge drinking for a long time. Concern about young people making choices that harm themselves and others is the very reason for SADD's existence. We believe our 27 years of work in the field qualify us as experts on this issue.

2. Then why does SADD oppose a rollback in the drinking age to 18?

In studying this issue, SADD is guided by history, statistics, and science, not convenience, anecdote, or emotion. We join a number of leading experts who have studied this issue, including the National Academy of Sciences and the U.S. Surgeon General. We agree that this is a difficult issue, and it will take a powerful investment by many players to reduce underage drinking, but we do not think changing the drinking age to 18 is part of the solution.

3. Many people grew up when the drinking age was 18 and they handled it OK. Why can't today's teens do the same?

In fact, the statistics don't support this idea. One of the reasons the drinking age was moved from 18 to 21 is because states that lowered their drinking ages experienced increases in youth fatalities. When those states moved the age up again to 21, fatalities significantly decreased. The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration estimates that the minimum drinking age of 21 has saved more than 25,000 lives since 1975.

4. If young people are old enough to fight and die for their country, and mature enough to vote, why are they not responsible enough to drink a beer?

Choosing to serve in the military is an important career decision. Voting for a political candidate is a judgment made (it is hoped) with much thought and contemplation. Studies have shown that adolescents generally do as well as adults when making reasoned decisions in emotionally neutral situations. This is not the case in situations where underage drinking is likely to occur, for example, where peers are present and/or in emotionally charged settings. Underage drinking is not the same type of decision at all, and adults have a responsibility to protect both adolescents and those around them from the consequences of poor decisions. Under these circumstances, it is perfectly appropriate that the law should protect the public health and safety.

Underage drinking imposes high costs on this society, which can be measured in many ways. Each year, more than 6,000 youth die due to alcohol-related causes, including traffic crashes, homicides, suicides, alcohol poisonings and unintentional injuries such as

drowning and falls. Many thousands more are injured and injure others while under the influence of alcohol. According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, alcohol use among teens is linked to two thirds of all sexual assaults and date rapes, as well as increased violence, alcohol poisonings, and diminished academic performance. The cost of underage drinking to society is estimated to be more than \$60 billion annually. Under these circumstances, a strong public health and safety response is required.

5. Most teens wouldn't go overboard drinking alcohol if it weren't forbidden. The main allure of alcohol for teens is that they've been told they are not allowed to do it, which guarantees they will want to try it. If drinking were legal, wouldn't fewer teens be attracted to it?

In fact, teenagers choose not to drink because it is forbidden. According to SADD's national *Teens Today* research, students in grades 6-12 ranked the drinking age as the number one reason why they choose not to use alcohol. High school teens who tend to avoid alcohol are more than twice as likely as those who repeatedly use alcohol to say their parents never let them drink at home.

Additionally, there has been a growing body of research on adolescent brain development that shows alcohol consumption is both particularly attractive to teens and particularly dangerous. The 2007 *Surgeon General's Call to Action to Prevent and Reduce Underage Drinking* outlines many of these reasons. "Adolescence is a time of heightened risk taking, independence seeking, and experimentation ... During this period, alcohol can present a special allure to some adolescents for social, genetic, psychological and cultural reasons. This attraction occurs at the very time adolescents may not be fully prepared to anticipate all the effects of drinking alcohol and when they are more vulnerable to certain of its adverse consequences. Further, alcohol has been shown to impair one's ability to evaluate risk and reward when making decisions."

(www.surgeongeneral.gov/topics/underagedrinking/calltoaction.pdf)

6. Why does Europe, where the drinking age is lower than 21, not have the same problems with young adult drinking that the U.S. does?

Actually, this is a myth. In all European countries except Turkey, the rate of current drinking among youth and the rate of binge drinking among young people is higher than the U.S.. In some places (the UK, Ireland, the Netherlands, Denmark, and Germany, for example), it is significantly higher. This myth is a primary example of how the public debate on this issue in the U.S. has been diverted by misinformation.

7. Having the drinking age set at 21 means that a portion of college students can drink and another group cannot. Doesn't this cause serious problems for college administrators?

SADD can't tell college administrators how to run their campuses, but we do know that many colleges have figured out ways to decrease drinking by those under 21 and have seen significant changes in a number of measures, including decreased assaults, arrests, ejections from public events and traffic violations. The National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA) released a comprehensive report studying the problem

of underage drinking on college campuses just five years ago, and many of their recommendations have yet to be implemented.

We also note that if the age were lowered to 18, we would have a similar situation in *high schools*, where some students were legally able to drink while others were not, creating a more difficult situation on our high school campuses than already exists.

8. You are never going to stop underage drinking. Why not put your energy into teaching young people how to drink so you can at least reduce the harm?

SADD disagrees that as a society we cannot make significant changes that will promote an intolerance toward underage drinking and a resulting decrease in the costs that result from underage drinking, particularly the costs among our 18- to 20-year-olds. We note that between 1982 and 1996, the number of alcohol-related traffic fatalities among 15-20-year-olds dropped by almost 60 percent. This change occurred as a result of a concerted effort at all levels of the culture: government, educators, the media, parents and teens themselves to make impaired driving unacceptable. We recognize that this is a challenge, but we believe the results are worth it.