Adolescent Alcohol Consumption: How Health Plans Can Help

Alcohol is the most commonly abused drug among adolescents in the United States, beating out both tobacco and illicit drugs.\(^1\) The most recent National Survey on Drug Use and Health found that 26.3 percent of youth between the ages of 12 and 20 reported drinking alcohol in the past month and 17 percent reported binge drinking. A recent study performed by Mayo Clinic researchers found that hospitalization costs related to underage drinking amounted to $755 million in 2008.\(^{ii}\) That number likely represents just part of the larger cost of underage drinking to society, including not only hospitalizations but also decreases in youth and parental productivity, permanent disabilities and death. This report also found that the average age for hospitalization is 18 years old, which is well below the drinking age in most states. Youth who drink alcohol are more likely than those who abstain from alcohol to experience social, legal and physical problems, including the disruption of normal growth and development, and increases in memory loss.\(^{iii}\) Adolescent alcohol use is a major public health problem that requires cooperation and efforts from all sectors, including health plans and health plan foundations.

Health plans and health plan foundations are well-positioned to engage in efforts to prevent or decrease adolescent alcohol consumption due, in part, to their membership communications with the parents of adolescents. A recent study found that teens whose parents disapprove of underage drinking are less likely to consume alcohol than their peers whose parents do not express disapproval.\(^{iv}\) Other recent research has found that parents also influence the amount their teenage children drink and parental discussion about the dangers of alcohol can decrease likelihood of binge drinking.\(^{v}\) Health plans can help by connecting parents with information and resources on how to discuss alcohol use with their children. The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) points out that some parents find it difficult to discuss underage drinking with their children since alcohol is legal for adult consumption and parents often drink it themselves. The AAP website offers information for parents on how to overcome these communication challenges.

An educational webinar series is one way health plans can reach out to members and the public to prevent adolescent alcohol abuse. Cigna recently launched a free educational webinar series that discusses drug and alcohol abuse among youth. These webinars aim to help people understand the physical, mental and emotional signs of adolescent substance abuse and to provide resources for parents, caregivers or loved ones if they suspect their children are using drugs or alcohol. Each session features a national expert and a parent from The Partnership at Drugfree.org’s Parent Advisory Board who has had personal experience with the topic being presented. These webinars are recorded and archived so that the public may access them at any time.

Horizon Blue Cross Blue Shield of New Jersey has educated parents about the pressures that teens face to drink alcohol through a short but informative member
Health plans and health plan foundations can engage in a wide variety of other efforts to prevent or decrease adolescent alcohol consumption:

- Educate providers about the warning signs of adolescent alcohol abuse using resource guides such as the Alcohol Screening and Brief Intervention for Youth: A Practitioner’s Guide, which is designed to help practitioners identify youth who are at risk of alcohol-related issues.
- Support community organizations that work to prevent youth alcohol consumption.
- Inform adolescent members about the short and long-term physical, emotional and economic damage caused by underage drinking.
- Direct youth members to trusted and reputable websites such as The Cool Spot. The Cool Spot is a website designed by the National Institute on Alcohol and Alcoholism for youth aged 11-13 to educate them about alcohol consumption. Through a variety of quizzes and fun tools, The Cool Spot educates adolescents about alcohol use among their peers. The site is designed to be attractive to youth and includes activities to help youth learn the dangers of alcohol and ways to resist peer pressure.
- Refer parents and caregivers to the Stop Alcohol Abuse website. Stop Alcohol Abuse acts as a gateway to information and resources on the prevention of underage drinking. Fifteen Federal agencies make up the Interagency Coordinating Committee on the Prevention of Underage Drinking (ICCPUD) that maintains the site. Stop Alcohol Abuse contains recent research regarding underage drinking and information on relevant webinars and meetings across the country that address underage drinking issues.

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