

## Drugs and Sex

### A high-risk mix for adolescents and young adults

Drinking or other drug use is a risk factor for unsafe sexual behavior—risk taking that can result in serious consequences, including unintended pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases, and sexual violence. For adolescents and young adults whose first or only sexual experiences involve being under the influence, the combination of sex and drugs can also be a formula for deep shame and a lifelong pattern of unhealthy relationships.

Hazelden, part of the Hazelden Betty Ford Foundation, specializes in the assessment and treatment of addiction and co-occurring disorders for adolescents and young adults ages 12–25. Experts at our Plymouth, Minnesota, campus also work closely with parents and other family members throughout the treatment and recovery process. Brenda Servais, PsyD, LP, LADC, serves as the lead psychologist for Hazelden’s youngest female patients. Nikki Erdman, MA, LADC, supervisor of chemical dependency programming, counsels adolescent and young adult patients. Below, these clinicians share insights about the high-risk mix of adolescent and young adult substance use and sexual behavior.

#### 1. Lasting consequences of “liquid courage.”

Adolescents and young adults are naturally wired to take risks and push boundaries, but when alcohol or other drugs and sex are in the mix, risk taking brings increasingly dangerous consequences. As psychologist Servais explains, alcohol is called “liquid courage” for a reason. “Drinking or other drug use can lower a young person’s sexual inhibitions and skew judgment. It’s a situation that can bring greater potential for risky sexual behaviors, engaging in regrettable or embarrassing sexual behavior, and even blurring the line between consensual sex and sexual violence.”

Substance Abuse and Risky Sexual Behavior: Attitudes and Practices among Adolescents and Young Adults, a national survey of 1,200 adolescents and young adults conducted by the Kaiser Family Foundation, reveals a troubling picture when young people combine sex and drugs:

- About 29 percent of sexually active people ages 18–24 say they have “done more” sexually than they had planned while drinking or using drugs.
- Almost one quarter of sexually active young people ages 15–24 report having had unprotected sex because they were drinking or using drugs, including 12 percent of teens ages 15–17.
- Because of something they did while drinking or using other drugs, 26 percent of sexually active teens ages 15–17 have worried about sexually transmitted diseases or pregnancy.

## 2. Caught in a vicious cycle.

Engaging in embarrassing or regrettable sexual behavior while under the influence can lead to another destructive consequence for young people: shame. As addiction specialist Erdman explains, feelings of shame can provide powerful fuel for the disease of addiction. “A young person might feel tremendous shame or humiliation about his or her sexual behavior while under the influence, painful feelings that can lead to drinking or using again, which can then lead to more sexual risk taking.” Shame plays a devastating and all too familiar role in protracting addiction, says Erdman.

## 3. Learning what healthy relationships look like.

Addiction is an isolating disease, adds Servais. Hanging out with others who are drinking or doing drugs might look like a social activity, but for the young person with addiction, there’s little or no emotional connection taking place. It’s a lonely disease, even in a crowd.

In their work with young people in treatment, Servais and Erdman help patients recognize the difference between healthy and unhealthy relationships. “A huge part of being successful in addiction recovery—and life in general—is knowing how to develop and maintain healthy relationships, including romantic relationships,” says Servais. It’s not unusual for young people in treatment to experience for the first time what it’s like to feel safe talking about their feelings—a basic requirement for building healthy relationships.

### Skewed judgment.

“Drinking or other drug use can lower a young person’s sexual inhibitions and skew judgment.”

—**Brenda Servais, PsyD, LP, LADC**  
*Lead Psychologist,  
Female Unit*

## 4. The Hazelden Betty Ford Foundation can help.

Hundreds of young people find freedom from addiction every year through Hazelden Betty Ford Foundation’s programs for adolescents and young adults, and parents often serve as powerful change agents in that process. But it’s not an easy road for parents, and the path isn’t always clear. That’s why the Hazelden Betty Ford Foundation provides extensive help and support for parents and other family members. Learn more today by visiting [hazelden.org/youth](http://hazelden.org/youth) or by calling **855-348-7028**.

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Hazelden Betty Ford Foundation, a national nonprofit organization founded in 1949, helps people reclaim their lives from the disease of addiction.

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