

The Holidays Conversation

Why is This Important?

College alcohol consumption increases during celebrations for special events. Many college students use certain holidays as an opportunity to drink excessively. Some of these holidays are Halloween, Mardi Gras, Cinco de Mayo, New Year’s Eve, the Wednesday before Thanksgiving, and Saint Patrick’s Day.¹ Many schools have events that are created by students and serve mainly as drinking days.

These days of heightened drinking create many adverse consequences for the students, university, and surrounding community. Students might skip class during these highly anticipated drinking holidays and might even skip class the day after to recover. Oftentimes, they miss important assignments and lessons, which can lead to academic struggles. Try to help your student avoid the cycle of skipping class, falling behind, and drinking or using drugs.

Many family members and students are under the impression that all or most college students participate in underage and or excessive drinking (“everyone does it...”). **This is not true.**

In fact, most college students do NOT drink excessively. Unfortunately, the popular—but false— notion that underage and/or excessive drinking is “normal” leads some students to rationalize their participation in what is actually an extreme behavior. The fact that excessive drinking is highly visible masks the reality that only a minority of students are doing it.

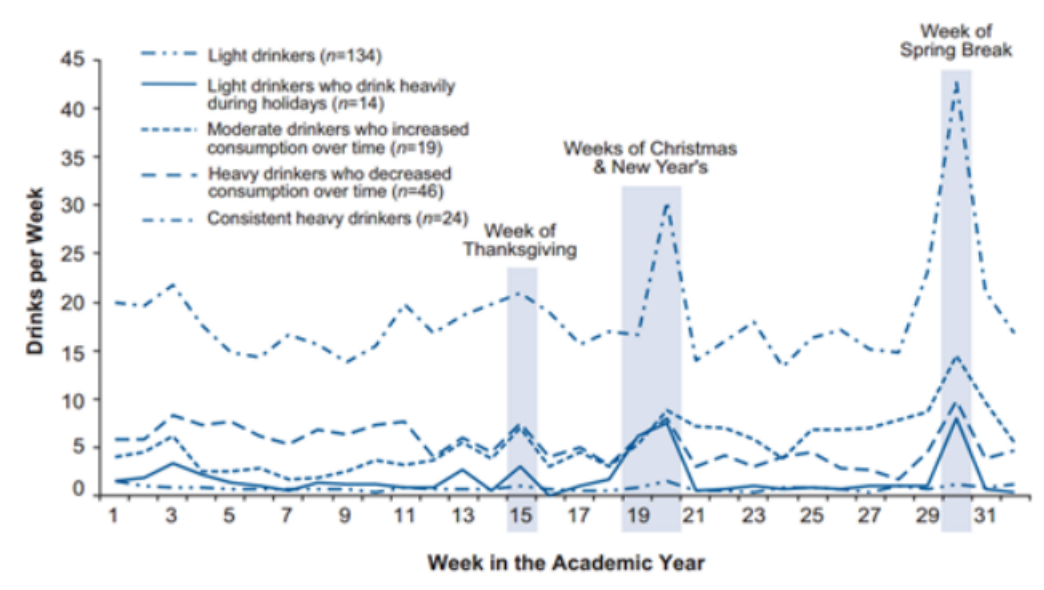


Figure 1. Researchers saw an increase in consumption around the holidays.^{1,2}

✓ SAY THIS

“What are your plans for St. Patrick’s Day?”

Start the conversation by asking your student about their plans for certain holidays.

“How are your friends celebrating the holiday?”

You can then ask what your student’s friends are doing.

“I’ve heard that at some schools on St. Patrick’s day, they have a huge parade where there is lots of drinking. Do they do this at your school?”

You can bring up holidays and events at other schools to see if your student’s school celebrates in that manner as well.

“Do your friends get drunk on the holidays? Have you been in situations where you or your friends start out with one or two drinks, but the holiday celebration turns it into too many?”

“Just because it is a holiday today, it doesn’t mean that drinking underage is acceptable.”

If your student is 21 or older and plans on celebrating the holidays with alcohol, you should speak with them about lower-risk alcohol use. You should try to discourage them from providing alcohol to their younger, underage friends as well. If they are not yet 21, discourage any use of alcohol.

“I’m happy you chose to do that with your friends. You’re making smart decisions.”

If they have plans to celebrate in other positive ways, you should encourage their behavior.

“I expect you to be in class the day after Halloween.”

It’s important to encourage your student to attend class during these holidays and the following day.

X NOT THIS

"It's fine to skip class; I know you're really hung over."

Do not encourage your student to be irresponsible on these days.

"I bet everyone is going to be so drunk on Halloween. Is that what you plan on doing?"

Don't assume. **Don't make drinking seem normative.**

Scientific References

1. Greenbaum PE, Del Boca FK, Darkes J, Chen-Pin W, Goldman MS. Variation in the drinking trajectories of freshmen college students. *J Consult Clin Psych.* 2005; 73:229–238.
2. Graph in NIAAA College Bulletin, NIH Publication No. 07–5010. Printed November 2007. Online at http://www.collegedrinkingprevention.gov/1College_Bulletin-508_361C4E.pdf.

Disclaimer: Unfortunately, even with the “best” parenting practices, there is no guarantee that students will refrain from starting to use drugs or alcohol, developing a drug problem, or even worse, experiencing serious drug-related consequences. Conversely, the worst of circumstances does not necessarily predispose one to a life of addiction.