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Prevention First Marks Alcohol Awareness Month with a Call to Act Sooner

SPRINGFIELD, IL — As April marks Alcohol Awareness Month, Prevention First is drawing attention to a critical and often overlooked reality: alcohol remains the most commonly used substance among Illinois youth, and many begin before they ever reach high school.

Data from the 2024 [Illinois Youth Survey \(IYS\)](#), a statewide survey of 8th, 10th, and 12th graders conducted by the University of Illinois' Center for Prevention Research and Development, reveals the scope of the challenge across Illinois communities. Among 12th graders, 37% reported using alcohol in the past year and 21% reported drinking in the past 30 days. More concerning, 8% of 12th graders reported binge drinking (defined as five or more drinks in a row) within the past two weeks. Even among 8th graders, 18% reported alcohol use in the past year, and roughly 1 in 12 had consumed alcohol in the past 30 days.

Perhaps most striking: among 12th graders who have ever used alcohol, the average age of first use was just 14.7 years old.

"These numbers remind us that alcohol prevention cannot wait until high school," said Karel Homrig, CEO of Prevention First. "When young people take that first drink at 14 or younger, their developing brains are at real risk. Alcohol Awareness Month is our opportunity as a state to recommit to prevention that starts early, involves families, and is grounded in evidence."

Nationally, alcohol-related harms underscore the urgency. Researchers at the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA) estimate that alcohol contributes to more than 178,000 deaths each year in the United States, making it a leading preventable cause of death. Alcohol is also associated with more than 200 disease and injury-related conditions, and it is a significant factor in the deaths of people younger than age 21, including deaths from motor vehicle crashes, overdoses, falls, and drownings. Alcohol Awareness Month, observed each April, was established in 1987 to reduce the stigma surrounding alcohol use disorder and to increase public education about its causes and consequences. It arrives at a particularly

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meaningful time of year — the start of prom season and the weeks before summer break when social pressure and opportunities for underage drinking often increase.

How You Can Help

Prevention First encourages Illinois residents, parents, educators, and community leaders to use this month as a starting point for action:

- **Talk early and often.** Research consistently shows that parental conversations about alcohol reduce youth use. Don't assume your child already has the information they need.
- **Know the signs.** Mood changes, dropping grades, secretive behavior, or a sudden change in friend groups may signal that a young person needs support.
- **Access free resources.** Prevention First offers training, resources, and prevention programming for schools, community organizations, and families across Illinois. Visit prevention.org to learn more.

About Prevention First

Prevention First is an Illinois-based nonprofit with more than 40 years of experience in substance use prevention and mental health promotion. Through training, technical assistance, and advocacy, Prevention First equips individuals, families, schools, and communities across Illinois with the knowledge and tools to prevent substance use before it starts. Learn more at prevention.org.

Source: Center for Prevention Research and Development (CPRD). (2024). Illinois Youth Survey 2024 Frequency Report: State of Illinois. Champaign, IL: CPRD, School of Social Work, University of Illinois. Retrieved from <https://iys.cprd.illinois.edu>

National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA). (2025). April is Alcohol Awareness Month. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, National Institutes of Health. Retrieved from <https://www.niaaa.nih.gov/news-events/announcement/april-alcohol-awareness-month>

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