NO PREP

Party Smart

New Year's Safety, Alcohol, and Risky Decisions

Includes: Student reading, case study, differentiated questions, teacher key

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Name: Period: Date:

Party Smart: New Year's Safety, Alcohol, and Risky Decisions

Why New Year's Eve Changes How People Act

New Year's Eve has a strange reputation. Adults call it a "night to remember," but many emergency rooms quietly call it a "night of bad decisions." Even if you are not drinking, you're often surrounded by crowds, loud music, late nights, and people talking about doing something "wild" before the year ends. That combination can change how you think and act. Psychologists talk about situational pressure—the way a setting can nudge you toward choices you might not make in a quiet, everyday moment. New Year's often includes several of these pressures at once: being out late, feeling hyped-up, wanting stories to tell, worrying about fitting in, and sometimes being around alcohol or other substances. Your brain is still developing into your mid-20s, especially parts in the prefrontal cortex that handle planning, impulse control, and weighing long-term

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Alcohol, the Brain, and Risky Situations

Alcohol is a depressant, which means it slows down the nervous system. At first, that can feel like the opposite: people may become louder, more talkative, or more confident. That "buzz" happens because alcohol lowers inhibitions, the brakes your

brain normally uses to keep behavior in check. As blood alcohol concentration (BAC) rises, reaction time slows, coordination gets worse, and judgment becomes less accurate. You may underestimate how impaired you are, which is one reason drunk driving and other dangerous behaviors are such a problem on New Year's Eve. For teenagers, alcohol carries extra risks. The teen brain is still wiring itself, especially areas that control planning, decision-making, and emotional regulation. Research suggests that heavy drinking at a young age can interfere with memory, learning, and mood, and can increase the likelihood of developing a substance use disorder later in life. Mix alcohol with other factors (like riding with a distracted driver, walking near busy roads at night, or being in unfamiliar places), and risk multiplies quickly. New Year's also adds social pressure. Someone might hand you a drink you didn't ask for, make fun of you if you say no, or push for risky stunts "for the story" or "for the snap." In those moments, it helps to remember that consent and safety apply to more than just relationships. They apply to any situation where your body and choices are involved. You have the right to know what you're drinking, to refuse any substance, and to leave a situation that feels unsafe. Having that mindset before the night starts makes it easier to stick to your decision when the music is loud and everyone is yelling "Happy New Year." This table is not permission to drink; it's a reminder that risks stack up. The safest choice for anyone underage is not drinking at all, and for everyone, it's to avoid combining alcohol with driving or other dangerous activities.

Planning Ahead: Boundaries, Scripts, and Backup Plans

Staying safe on New Year's (or any night) is much easier if you decide your boundaries before the event starts. A boundary might be "I'm not drinking at all," "I will not ride with anyone who has been drinking," or "I'm leaving by 12:30." Once you've chosen your lines, tell at least one person you trust. Saying it out loud—"I'm not drinking tonight, just so you know"—makes you more likely to stick with it. Another helpful tool is having scripts ready. In the moment, it's hard to think of what to say if someone pushes a drink toward you or teases you for saying no. Practicing simple lines in advance can make them easier to use: "Nah, I'm good—got an early morning tomorrow." "I promised I'd be the ride for my siblings." "I don't drink, but I'll take a soda." Most people will move on quickly if you sound confident and don't debate. If someone keeps pushing, that's a red flag about them, not you.

Finally, build backup plans into your night. Keep your phone charged. Arrange at least two safe ways home (for example, a parent who has agreed to pick you up, plus a rideshare or trusted adult). Share your location with a friend or family member you trust. Agree with your friends to leave together if a situation feels off. These aren't "paranoid" steps—they're normal safety strategies that many adults use too. The point of New Year's is not to collect the scariest story; it's to start the year in one piece, with your health, your record, and your relationships intact. Knowing how alcohol works, recognizing risky situations, and practicing what you'll say in advance are signs of maturity—not weakness. Party smart means you stay in charge of your choices, instead of letting one night decide the rest of your year.

Key Information: Quick Reference: Alcohol, Risk, and Safer Choices

Situation or Factor	Risk It Creates	Safer Strategy
Drinking on an empty stomach	Faster rise in BAC, stronger impairment	Eat a real meal before going out
Riding with a driver who has been drinking	High risk of crash, injury, or death	Pre-plan a sober driver, rideshare, or parent
Mixed messages about "how much is okay"	Underestimating how impaired someone really is	Stick to no alcohol if underage; know the laws
Peer pressure to "keep up"	Overdrinking, blackouts, accidents	Practice firm "no" statements and have an exit plan
Late night in crowded, unfamiliar places	Getting lost, separated from friends, unsafe encounters	Stay with trusted people; share locations, check in

Case Study Excerpt – One Ride, Big Consequences

Marcus wasn't planning to drink on New Year's Eve. His plan was simple: hang out at a friend's house, play games, and be home by 12:30. Early in the night, he stuck to soda and kept an eye on the time. But as midnight approached, the music got louder and a few older cousins arrived with a cooler. Someone pushed a cup into his hand and said, "Come on, it's New Year's—just one." Marcus didn't want to look uptight, so he took a few sips. It didn't seem like much, but he hadn't eaten since lunch. Around 12:45, his cousin Jalen jingled his car keys and said, "Let's hit the drive-thru, I'm starving." Marcus hesitated. He'd seen Jalen with a beer earlier, but Jalen laughed it off: "I'm fine, I've got the best reflexes in this family." Marcus told himself it was a short trip and climbed in. A few minutes later, they hit a patch of wet road near a sharp curve. Jalen's delayed reaction meant they swerved too late. The car slid into a ditch, airbags exploding. They were lucky to walk away with bruises—but Marcus spent the next week replaying one thought: they had other options, and he hadn't insisted on them.

1. What warning signs were present before Marcus decided to get in the car with Jalen?

2. What safer choices could Marcus and his friends have made earlier in the night to avoid this situation?

Multiple Choice

1. According to the reading, alcohol makes risky situations more dangerous for teens mainly because it:

a) Only affects adults and college students, not teenagers

b) Lowers inhibitions and slows judgment in a still-developing brain

c) Strengthens memory and focus during stressful events like driving

d) Improves reaction time and decision-making

2. In Marcus's story, the biggest safety problem with Jalen driving is that:

a) It was late at night and the drive-thru was closed

b) Marcus was sitting in the front seat instead of the back seat

c) They didn't know how to work the car's radio

d) Jalen had been drinking and had delayed reactions on a wet road

3. Which of the following is the BEST example of setting a boundary before a New Year's event?

a) Telling a friend ahead of time, "I'm not riding with anyone who's been drinking"

b) Assuming your friends will make all the safety decisions for you before going out

c) Waiting until someone hands you a drink to decide how you feel

d) Posting every minute of the party on social media

Matching

Write the letter of the correct definition on the line next to each term.

Term	Definition
1. ___ Inhibition	A) Influence from friends or group expectations
2. ___ Blood alcohol concentration (BAC)	B) Pre-planned words for saying "no" or setting limits
3. ___ Peer pressure	C) Line you decide not to cross about your own behavior
4. ___ Boundary	D) Proportion of alcohol in the bloodstream
5. ___ Safety script	E) Brain's braking system that helps control impulses

Fill-in-the-Blank

1. Alcohol is a _____ that slows the nervous system and can impair coordination and judgment.

2. When someone feels pushed to drink or take risks just to "fit in," they are experiencing peer _____.

3. Deciding in advance that you will not ride with any driver who has been drinking is an example of a personal _____.

Short Answer

Answer each question in 2-4 complete sentences.

1. Identify two specific factors that can make New Year's Eve especially risky for teens and explain why each one increases danger.

2. Describe one coping strategy or safety plan from the reading that you would recommend to a friend who feels pressured to drink on New Year's Eve. Explain how it could help.

3. Why is "party smart" a better long-term strategy than simply hoping nothing bad happens? Use examples from the reading or case study.