



Clues for a healthy and safe spring break

Spring break 2005 is just around the corner, and campuses and organizations throughout the country are doing all they can to make certain it will be a safe and memorable experience for their students. Instead of feeding the stereotypes of drunk and disorderly partygoers in the spring break hot spots of Mexico or Florida, many students will be feeding the homeless.

Students from San Diego State University will travel to South Africa to build houses, work at orphanages, and engage in other service projects. In past years, students at Monmouth College in Illinois have tutored migrant farm workers in Florida, registered voters in Mississippi, and worked at soup kitchens in Washington, D.C. In fact, Break Away, a nonprofit organization (<http://www.alternativebreaks.org/>) that organizes alternative break programs for college and high school students, estimates that 30,000 U.S. students will participate in some alternative break experience this year.

This is no doubt bad news for the tour promoters who lure college students to Mexican vacation sites that promise "50 hours of free drinking" over seven days where the drinking age of 18 is "rarely enforced."

When alcohol is free flowing and laws regarding underage drinking are not always enforced, young people run the risk of alcohol poisoning from binge drinking, being injured or killed in a drunk driving incident, contracting sexually transmitted diseases, and being raped, robbed, drugged, or otherwise injured.

The statistics regarding college drinking are dire enough each year without compounding the problem with spring break revelry. According to the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA), students who drink excessively have higher rates of injuries, assaults, academic problems, arrests, vandalism, and other health and social problems each year compared to their non-drinking counterparts. In a year, NIAAA reports that:

- 1,400 college students between the ages of 18 and 24 die from alcohol-related unintentional injuries.
- 500,000 college students are unintentionally injured under the influence of alcohol.
- More than 600,000 students are assaulted by another student who has been drinking.
- More than 70,000 students between 18 and 24 are victims of alcohol-related sexual assault or date rape, and 100,000 report having been too intoxicated to know if they consented to having sex.
- 2.1 million students between 18 and 24 drove under the influence of alcohol last year.
- 31 percent of college students met the criteria for a diagnosis of alcohol abuse and 6 percent for a diagnosis of alcohol dependence in the past 12 months.

In addition to offering alternative activities (many of which qualify for college credit), many universities and colleges are taking measures to educate students about ways to prevent injury and tragedy for those who are drawn to the spring break party scene. Spring break can be a fun and healthy experience if students learn to make responsible and safe decisions, according to BACCHUS & GAMMA Peer Education Network, a nonprofit association in Denver that focuses on alcohol abuse prevention and other student health and safety issues. Each year, BACCHUS & GAMMA launches prevention campaigns on over 1,000 campuses. They designate March as "Safe Spring Break Month."

This year, BACCHUS & GAMMA's spring break campaign is a takeoff on the board game "Clue," with character cards like "Ms. Scarlet in the clubs," reminding students to "watch your drink; don't drink any unattended beverage." The "Get a Clue Safe Spring Break Kit" contains posters, ideas for campus



activities, and a programming manual that includes well-documented information on drugs, alcohol impairment, road safety, sun safety, sexually transmitted diseases, and other issues.

Pledge cards are also an important component of the campaign, said Janet Cox, associate executive director at BACCHUS & GAMMA. "Most campuses use pledge cards as a visual reminder to students that they have made a commitment to act safely and responsibly," she said. "Some campuses are sending out the cards electronically so students can print them, sign them, then use them as a ticket to get into various safe spring break kickoff events."

To see what you can do to help make this spring break the safest ever, go to <http://www.bacchusgamma.org/>. For information regarding the dangers and consequences of drinking by college students and for recommendations on how to deal with this serious problem, see NIAAA's "College Drinking: Changing the Culture" at <http://www.collegedrinkingprevention.gov/>.

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Alive & Free is a health column that provides information to help prevent substance abuse problems and address such problems. It is created by Hazelden, a nonprofit agency based in Center City, Minn., that offers a wide range of information and services on addiction. For more resources, [email](#) or call Hazelden at 800-257-7810 (outside the US 651-213-4200).