

Alcohol - teenagers

Alcohol is widely used by young people. Around 90 per cent of Australian teenagers over the age of 14 years have tried alcohol at least once. 'Binge drinking', drink driving and unsafe sex can all result from the misuse of alcohol.

Alcohol is tolerated as a socially acceptable drug, yet it is responsible for most drug-related deaths in the teenage population. Alcohol is also associated with a variety of serious health risks. It's difficult to prevent teenagers from experimenting with alcohol, but parents **can** encourage sensible drinking habits.

The safest level of drinking for teenagers is no drinking, especially for young people under 15 years of age. If older teenagers **do** drink, parents can minimise the risks by providing adult supervision and encouraging consumption within the adult guideline for low-risk drinking (two standard drinks in any one day).

Parents believe alcohol is less dangerous than other drugs

Adolescence is typically a time of experimentation. This reflects Australia's tolerant approach to alcohol use. Alcohol is one of the most commonly used drugs in Australia. Estimates suggest that around half of the population over the age of 14 years drinks alcohol at least weekly.

There is some evidence to suggest parents are so alarmed at the thought of their children using 'harder' drugs that alcohol is considered a lesser and more acceptable 'evil'. Yet it has been estimated that 3,430 Australians died due to alcohol use in 2003 and in 2001 there were 64,782 alcohol-related episodes that needed care in hospital. Both of these are more than those attributed to illicit drug use.

Alcohol – the risks

Irresponsible use of alcohol can lead to:

- 'Binge drinking' or drinking too much on a single occasion
- Drink driving
- Unsafe sex
- Impaired brain development
- Injury or death.

Binge or heavy drinking

'Binge drinking' is the term commonly used to describe drinking heavily over a short period of time with the intention of becoming intoxicated. This can be very harmful to a person's health and wellbeing. As well as increasing the risk of health problems, this can lead young people to take risks and put themselves in dangerous situations.

Common effects of 'binge' episodes include:

- Hangovers
- Headaches
- Nausea and vomiting
- Shakiness.

'Binge drinking' means different things to different people. New Australian recommendations released in 2009 talk about drinking too much 'on a single occasion of drinking' rather than 'binge drinking', but the harm that can be done to the drinker and their community are essentially the same.

Drinking too much 'on a single occasion of drinking' means drinking significantly more than the recommended level of four standard drinks on any one occasion. Just over 10 per cent of Australian teenagers drink more than this every week.

'Schoolies' week

Finishing high school ('schoolies week') is often linked to episodes of very high levels of 'single-session' drinking and/or deliberately drinking to intoxication. Over 70 per cent of male school leavers and 60 per cent of females report getting drunk on most or all days or nights of their 'schoolies week'.

Drink driving

Car accidents are a leading cause of death for teenagers. In 2006–07, one out of four drivers or riders killed or injured in road accidents in Victoria were over the legal limit for blood alcohol concentration (BAC).

Alcohol and sex

Alcohol impairs judgement. Teenagers are more likely to engage in unsafe sexual practices when they have been drinking. Other associated risks include:

- Date rape
- Sexual intercourse without a condom
- Exposure to sexually transmissible infections (STIs)
- Possible pregnancy.

Impaired brain development

Drinking alcohol can affect how the brain develops in young adults under the age of 25. Young people under 15 years of age are particularly at risk. Teenage brains are still developing and the areas of the brain that are undergoing the most dramatic changes during the teenage years are the frontal lobe and hippocampus. These areas are associated with motivation, impulse control and addiction.

Alcohol is a neurotoxin, which means it can poison the brain. One of the effects of excessive alcohol use is that it interferes with vitamin B absorption; this prevents the brain from working properly. Long-term drinking above the recommended levels may lead to a range of disorders, collectively known as alcohol-related brain damage. Symptoms can include learning and memory problems and difficulties with balance.

Serious injury or death

Young people are more likely to take risks when drinking. Alcohol is a significant factor in a range of risky situations, including:

- Fighting or brawling
- Drowning
- Drug overdose
- Self-harm or suicide.

Alcohol and other drugs

Taking alcohol with other drugs that also reduce activity in the brain, such as heroin and benzodiazepines, can be particularly risky. Increased risky situations can result. The combination of alcohol and drugs (including cannabis) can lead to increased risk taking. It can also make it difficult to drive or carry out other activities, with the potential to harm others as well as the drinker. Misuse of alcohol is often accompanied by misuse of other drugs.

Parental role modelling

Studies have shown that the most influential role models for children are their parents. Children learn by imitation, so it is important that parents demonstrate sensible drinking behaviours. Suggestions include:

- Drink moderately or not at all.
- Don't drink every time you socialise.
- Never drink drive.

Teaching responsible drinking

Parents can't prevent their teenagers from experimenting with alcohol, but they **can** encourage sensible drinking habits. Suggestions include:

- Offer good role modelling.
- Start teaching your child about alcohol from an early age.
- Explain the downside of heavy drinking, such as vomiting, head spins, passing out and hangovers.
- Educate your child on the links between drinking and dangerous behaviour, such as unsafe sex.
- Teach your child sensible tactics such as standard drink recommendations, 'pacing' themselves, alternating alcohol drinks with non-alcoholic beverages and not drinking on an empty stomach.
- Talk about the dangers of drink driving and plan alternatives together, such as public transport, designated drivers or calling home.
- Encourage your child to talk about the dangers of alcohol with their friends, so they can come up with ways to look out for each other.

Other factors that can prevent alcohol abuse

According to Australian research, there are many important factors that help reduce the likelihood of a young person abusing alcohol. As well as good parental role modelling, these factors include:

- A loving, supportive home life
- Educational programs in schools on the use and misuse of alcohol
- Development of personal, social, academic and employment skills
- A healthy lifestyle, such as regular exercise and a love of sports
- Restrictions on alcohol advertising
- Avoiding the use of scare tactics, which can backfire and increase alcohol use among teenagers.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- DrugInfo Clearinghouse Tel. 1300 858 584 – for information
- DirectLine Tel. 1800 888 236 – for 24-hour confidential drug and alcohol telephone counselling, information and referral

Things to remember

- Around 90 per cent of Australian teenagers over the age of 14 years have tried alcohol at least once.
- Alcohol is responsible for most drug-related deaths in the teenage population.
- Parents can't prevent their teenager from experimenting with alcohol, but they can encourage sensible drinking habits.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

Australian Drug Foundation

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