

Teenage health

Young people have to work through a broad range of issues as they move from childhood to adulthood. They might have to deal with changes to their family life or they might be thinking about having sex for the first time or experimenting with alcohol and other drugs.

Evidence suggests confident young people who feel supported by their families and friends are more likely to safely negotiate issues like these. However, it's important to remember that adolescence is typically a time for experimenting with risky behaviours, despite good parenting and role modelling.

Alcohol use

Alcohol is one of the most widely used drugs in Australia. According to a recent survey, more than eight out of 10 secondary school students reported drinking alcohol ever, with almost one quarter of 12–17 year olds having done so in the week of the survey.

For young people, alcohol use is associated with a number of health risks, including:

- Unsafe sex
- Unplanned pregnancy
- Drink driving and road accidents
- Fights
- Criminal activity.

Body image

Young people are at risk of developing a negative body image, where they dislike the way they look. The associated health problems for young people can include:

- Crash dieting and malnourishment
- Eating disorders, including anorexia and bulimia nervosa
- Obesity, as physical activity levels tend to fall
- Steroid use to build muscle mass.

Bullying

Estimates suggest that around one in six children are bullied every few weeks or more in Australia. Young people are bullied by their peers for a number of reasons, including:

- The way they look (for example, if they're overweight)
- Resisting pressure to conform
- Their cultural or socioeconomic background or religion
- Their academic achievements
- Their sexual orientation or behaviour
- Being 'the new kid' at school.

Cigarette smoking

Despite widespread media campaigns, tobacco smoking is still popular among Australian youth, especially young women, though the proportion of young people who smoke is declining.

Family life

Young people can face a number of issues relating to family life, including:

- Relationship problems between family members
- Domestic violence
- Abuse, including neglect and physical, sexual or emotional abuse
- Separation and divorce
- Stepfamilies.

For some young people, change can be positive. For example, if there has been a lot of conflict in a family, separation might be a better option.

Illegal drug use

Marijuana is one of the most commonly used illegal drugs by young people in their teens. Almost 14 per cent of 12–17 year old secondary students have tried it at least once. Other commonly used illegal drugs include hallucinogens, amphetamines, cocaine and ecstasy, with around seven per cent of 12-17 year olds having used one of these at least once.

It's often assumed that young people turn to drugs to ease depression or anxiety, but most try drugs simply for fun. Young men are more likely than young women to experiment with illegal drugs. Those who smoke and drink are also more inclined to try drugs than those who don't.

Media

Media, including print, television, film and online, can negatively affect young people in a number of ways, including:

- Exposing them to extreme violence, which can desensitise them to reality
- Supporting the cultural ideal that only thin is beautiful
- Reinforcing the importance of money, consumerism and status symbols.

Sexual relationships

Young people need access to comprehensive, factual information about sexuality to safely negotiate adult relationships. The issues young people can be confronted with include:

- Safer sex
- Contraception
- Sexually transmissible infections (STIs)
- Unplanned pregnancy
- Peer pressure
- Cultural definitions of gender roles and sexual orientation.

Suicide risk

After car accidents, suicide is the most common cause of death among young people in Australia. Research suggests more young women than young men attempt suicide, but young men are far more likely to succeed in taking their own lives.

In the past 10 years, the suicide rate for males aged 15–24 years has dropped considerably. However, young men living in rural and remote areas are more likely than those living in the city to take their own lives.

Pregnancy

South Australian figures show that around three per cent of young women aged 15–19 years became pregnant in 2009. Of these, around 50 per cent had an abortion. Around four per cent of children are born to mothers aged 13–17 years, with the rate of births to young mothers having remained stable in Australia in recent years. This could be related to increased access to effective contraceptives and the delivery of more comprehensive sex education.

Pregnancy can be a positive time for a young woman, but issues she might be confronted with include:

- High levels of emotional distress
- Isolation or a lack of understanding and support from family and friends
- Higher complication rates during pregnancy and birth than older women
- Financial pressures.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Kids Help Line Tel. 1800 55 1800
- Young People's Health Service Tel. (03) 9345 5888
- Community health centre
- Women's health centre

Things to remember

- Tobacco and alcohol are the drugs most widely used by young people.
- Young men are more likely than young women to drink alcohol and take other drugs and are at greater risk of suicide.
- One in six children are bullied by their peers in Australia.
- Young people need access to comprehensive, factual information about sexuality to safely negotiate adult relationships.

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

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