
Alcohol and teenagers

Summary

- Studies have shown that the most influential role models for children are their parents and carers.
 - You can't prevent your teenager from experimenting with alcohol, but you can encourage sensible drinking habits.
 - The safest level of alcohol drinking for teenagers is no drinking.
 - Be aware of the laws about serving alcohol to minors in your state or territory.
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Alcohol or booze is widely used by young people. Binge drinking, drink driving and unsafe sex can all result from the misuse of alcohol.

In Australia, alcohol is generally considered to be a socially acceptable drug, yet it is responsible for most drug-related deaths in the teenage population. Alcohol use also has a variety of serious health risks.

It's difficult to prevent teenagers from experimenting with alcohol, but parents and carers **can** encourage sensible drinking habits.

The safest level of alcohol drinking for teenagers is no drinking, especially for young people under 15 years of age. But if older teenagers do drink alcohol, parents and carers 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).

Be aware of the laws about serving alcohol to minors in your state or territory, including in your own home, as these have changed in some states. Call **DrugInfo** on 1300 85 85 84, contact your local legal aid service or visit the **Youth Law Australia** website to find out the situation in your area.

Teen alcohol usage statistics

The **2016 National Drug Strategy Household Survey** found that 77.8 per cent of 12–17 year olds have never had a full serve of alcohol. It also found that 1.4 per cent of 12–17 year olds drink weekly (while for the 18–24 age group, the figure is 28.7 per cent).

Parental role models and alcohol

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

Suggestions include:

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

Teaching responsible drinking

As parents and carers you can't prevent your teenagers from experimenting with alcohol, but you can encourage sensible drinking habits.

Suggestions include:

- Offer good role modelling.
 - Start teaching your child about alcohol from an early age.
 - Deal with stress in healthy ways that don't involve alcohol.
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- Explain the downside of heavy drinking, such as vomiting, head spins, passing out and hangovers.
- Educate your teenager on the links between drinking and dangerous behaviour, such as unsafe sex.
- Teach your teenager sensible tactics such as how to say no, standard drink recommendations, pacing themselves, alternating alcoholic 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 teenager to talk with their friends about the dangers of alcohol, so they can come up with ways to look out for each other.

Preventing alcohol abuse in teenagers

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:

- trying to have a good relationship and open communication between you and your child
- supporting their having a sense of belonging somewhere, such as in the family, their school or a sporting club
- reinforcing their positive achievements and experiences at school
- encouraging a supportive relationship with a role model outside of the family
- looking for opportunities for them to contribute to their community
- helping them feel respected and cared for.

Alcohol and its risks for teenagers

Young people are at greater risk of alcohol-related harm than adults. As the brain keeps developing into your mid-twenties, drinking alcohol as a teenager can greatly increase the risk of damage to the developing brain. It can also lead to problems with alcohol later in life.

Teenagers are likely to drink more than older people. Drinking heavily over a short period of time with the intention of becoming drunk is known as binge drinking. (Binge drinking is also defined as drinking more than the recommended level of four standard drinks on any one occasion.)

In the **2011 report on tobacco, alcohol, over-the-counter and illicit substance use among Australian secondary school students**, around 6.4 per cent of Australian secondary school students drank more than four drinks on one day in the previous seven days (see Table 4.14).

Common effects of binge drinking episodes include:

- hangovers
- headaches
- nausea and vomiting
- shakiness.

As well as increasing the risk of short- and longer-term health problems, binge drinking can lead to young people taking risks and putting themselves in dangerous situations, such as drink driving and having unsafe sex.

Drink driving and other risky behaviours increase the risk of alcohol-related harm, such as injury or death.

Drink driving

Car accidents and **drink driving** are a leading cause of death for young adults. In 2016, 29 young drivers lost their lives on Victorian roads, and 62 per cent were involved in crashes that occurred at high alcohol times (times of the day or week where fatal crashes are ten times more likely to involve alcohol).

Alcohol and sex

Alcohol impairs judgement. Teenagers are more likely to engage in unsafe sexual practices (such as having sexual intercourse without a condom) when they have been drinking.

Risks associated with unsafe sex include:

- exposure to sexually transmissible infections (STIs)

- possible pregnancy.

Alcohol and impaired brain development

Drinking alcohol can affect how the brain develops in people under the age of 25. People under 15 years of age are particularly at risk. Teenage brains are still developing, and the areas of the brain that undergo 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, which 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 injury (ARBI). Symptoms can include learning and memory problems, and difficulties with balance.

Alcohol and 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.

Schoolies week and alcohol

Celebrating the end of high school (schoolies week) is often linked to episodes of very high levels of single-session drinking or deliberately drinking to intoxication. Over 90 per cent of school leavers report getting drunk on most or all days or nights of their schoolies week and consuming an average of eight drinks in a single session.

Better Health Channel has more information for teens about partying safely during **schoolies week**.

Alcohol and other drugs

Misuse of alcohol can be linked to the misuse of other drugs. Taking alcohol with other drugs that also suppress the central nervous system, such as heroin and benzodiazepines, can be particularly risky. It can cause a person's breathing and heart rate to decrease to dangerous levels and increase the risk of overdose.

The combination of alcohol and drugs (including cannabis) can also lead to increased risk taking, making it difficult to drive or carry out other activities, with the potential to harm others as well as the drinker.

Where to get help

- Your **GP (doctor)**
- **Alcohol and Drug Foundation** Tel. **1300 85 85 84**
- **DirectLine** – 24-hour confidential drug and alcohol telephone counselling, information and referral Tel. **1800 888 236**
- **Family Drug Help** – information and support for people concerned about a relative or friend using drugs Tel. **1300 660 068**
- **Youth Support and Advocacy Service (YSAS)** — for people aged between 12 and 21 who are experiencing problems related to alcohol and other drugs Tel: **1800 458 685**

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