

Alcohol and young people:

Key statistics:

- On average, 1 in 4 hospitalisations of 15-25 year olds happen because of alcohol.
- 1 in 2 Australians aged 15–17 who get drunk will do something they regret.
- 70 Australians under 25 will be hospitalised due to alcohol-caused assault in an average week.
- 4 Australians under 25 die due to alcohol related injuries in an average week.

How many teenagers are drinking?

Alcohol consumption amongst teenagers is a concern. According to the 2007 National Drug Strategy Household Survey over 20% of 14-19 year olds consume alcohol on a weekly basis.

How much are teenagers drinking?

Amongst teenagers drinking, 29% of males aged 12-17 had consumed seven or more drinks on one occasion; and 32% of females in the same age group had consumed five or more drinks on one occasion (the 2005 Australian Secondary Students' Alcohol and Drug Survey).

How harmful is it?

Alcohol is a potent drug that depresses the central nervous system and changes the way people think and feel. Teenagers can be more vulnerable to the effects of alcohol because they have not built up physical tolerance. They also lack drinking experience and are less able to judge their own levels of intoxication. Most young people are smaller than adults and so alcohol can have a greater effect. There is some new evidence that developing minds and bodies may be more vulnerable to the negative effects of alcohol. The earlier a young person begins unsupervised drinking, the greater the risk of alcohol-related problems in later life.

A recent study has shown approximately 40% of 14-19 year olds drink at levels that risk harm in the short-term (the 2007 National Drug Strategy Household Survey).

The consequences of intoxication can include:

Alcohol related harms experienced by teenagers in the short term are significant. The most common alcohol-attributable causes of death and hospitalisations among teenagers include road injury, suicide, assault, pedestrian road injury and other accidents such as falls and drowning.

What can I do?

As a parent, you play an important role in educating your teenager about alcohol and helping them to develop a responsible attitude towards drinking. It's never too early to start talking to your children about the effects of alcohol, and this helps to keep the lines of communication open down the track.

How do I talk to my teenager about alcohol?

Young people are generally more concerned about the short-term social consequences of drinking too much (embarrassment, doing something they wouldn't do sober) rather than the long-term health impacts.

- Choose an appropriate time and place to talk
- Bring the topic up informally—perhaps after watching a TV show, a news item or a movie that acts as a conversation-starter
- Be open and honest and encourage your teenager to express their feelings, thoughts and opinions
- Be clear about the rules and ensure your teenager knows that under-age drinking is against the law in most circumstances. Research shows that teenagers expect and want their parents to set boundaries, even if they do transgress them occasionally
- Avoid scare tactics—young people are more likely to be persuaded by listening to a realistic presentation of the facts
- Talk to your teenager about your concerns so they understand the potential consequences of drinking

What about peer pressure—how do I deal with that?

Adolescence is a time of huge change for young people, which can leave them feeling vulnerable.

You can help your teenager to develop confidence in dealing with things like peer pressure. A good way to begin might be to role-play some typical scenarios, so you can:

- Help your teenager to say 'no' to alcohol, when there is pressure to drink
- Stress the importance of never getting into a car with a driver who has been drinking. Agree on a plan if this situation ever arises, which may include paying for a taxi when they get home, picking them up, or allowing them to stay overnight at a friend's place if that is not possible
- Talk about the dangers of drink spiking and how they can protect themselves
- Discuss what to do if a friend is intoxicated

What if my teenager comes home drunk?

Although you might want to talk to them about it immediately, especially if you're upset or angry, wait until they're sober so you can have a rational discussion.

At that time, reinforce the rules that have been broken, your disappointment and the consequences.

Your drinking, their drinking.

From an early age, your child will be aware of alcoholic drinks and patterns of drinking in your home. Let them observe you modelling sensible drinking habits, such as:

- Sometimes refusing a drink when offered
- Not always using alcohol to celebrate occasions or declaring, "I need a drink!" when you're dealing with a stressful period
- Not drinking to intoxication
- Not drinking and driving

What can I do if my teenager is planning a party?

- Be involved in the planning—discuss the ground rules before the party is announced
- Agree on whether alcohol will be allowed
- If alcohol is to be allowed, ensure you provide low-alcohol and non-alcoholic alternatives, as well as plenty of food
- Make sure there is some type of adult supervision
- Emphasise that excessive drinking will not be tolerated and agree on a plan for dealing with someone who is drunk or sick
- Uninvited guests (gatecrashers) are a growing problem. Check out Party Safe programs in your State or visit www.australia.gov.au/drinkingnightmare for more information on safe partying
- Plan how guests will get home
- Talk to other parents about their teenager's parties for advice