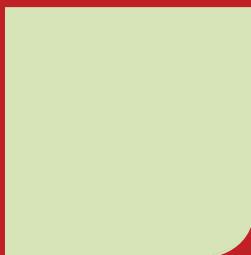


Drugs in focus

Teenage drinking: The facts and issues



Published by



Australian
Drug Foundation

• preventing drug problems •

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Australian
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Teenage drinking: The facts and issues

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ExxonMobil's partnership with ADF

The ExxonMobil Australia group of companies actively supports community projects in areas in which it operates, and has been a corporate partner with the ADF for more than nine years.

ExxonMobil Australia congratulates the ADF on developing the *Drugs in Focus* series of booklets for parents, which cover the following topics:

- *Alcohol and other drugs: A guide for parents*
- *Parent focus: Dealing with drug issues for 9 to 14-year-olds*
- *Hosting teenage parties: Managing alcohol and other drugs*
- *Teenage drinking: The facts and issues*
- *Young people and drugs: The facts and issues*

- *Safety first: Helping children to stay safe*
- *Riding the waves: A guide to building resilience in 10 to 14-year-olds*

ExxonMobil Australia and the ADF have also worked together to produce a resource for primary school teachers, *Primary Pathways: An integrated approach to drug education* (2005). This resource provides good advice for teachers on how to approach alcohol and other drug education during the primary school years and has lots of ideas and references for student activities.

Copies of the *Drugs in Focus* booklets and *Primary Pathways* can be obtained by calling the ADF on tel. 1300 85 85 84, or online at www.bookshop.adf.org.au.

Introduction

A recent report by the Australian National Council on Drugs highlighted that the biggest problem facing Australian families when it comes to substance abuse is young people binge drinking.¹

Alcohol is the most widely used and socially acceptable recreational drug in Australia.² Drinking alcohol is part of Australian life and is common among teenagers. Of particular concern is that many young people are “binge” drinking at levels that put them at risk of harm.

What are the facts about alcohol consumption by 12 to 17-year-olds, and what issues do they raise?

Teenage drinking: The facts and issues looks at patterns of alcohol use among teenagers, the potential consequences of these patterns of use and the influences on young people’s drinking. It also provides an overview of recent trends in the promotion of alcohol to young people.

This booklet will be of value to teachers, parents and teenagers.



Australia's drinking culture has come under scrutiny as the Government tackles teenage 'binge' drinking.

Alcohol guidelines

Parents should be aware of the Australian Alcohol Guidelines in relation to young people. These are currently being updated and the new guidelines will be available at www.alcohol.gov.au. For low risk of both immediate and long-term harm from drinking, the Australian Drug Foundation recommends:

- Young people up to 16 years of age should not drink alcohol at all.
- Young people between 16 and 18 years of age:
 - should keep any drinking to a minimum
 - if they choose not to drink, should be supported in this decision
 - should be supervised by adults at all times in settings where alcohol is available to them
 - most importantly, should not drink to become intoxicated.

There is no safe level of alcohol use for teenagers. The adult guidelines are limits meant for adults. The risks for young people are likely to be higher.



**There is no safe level of alcohol use for teenagers.
To maintain their health, they should be advised
not to drink.**

The facts about alcohol use by teenagers

The proportion of secondary school children who drink at dangerous levels increased between 1984 and 2005. For students aged 12–15 the level rose from 11% to 21% in 2005. For students aged 16–17 the increase was from 28% to 42%.⁴

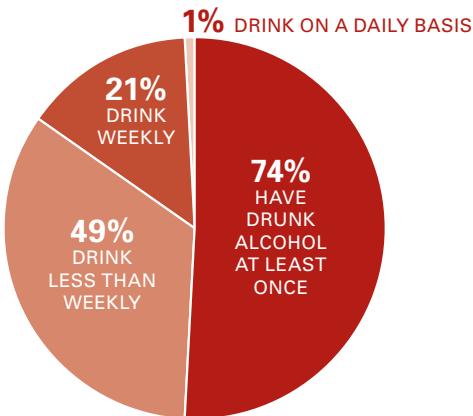
The Australian secondary school students' use of alcohol in 2005 report shows that by the time they were aged 17 nearly all students (96%) had consumed alcohol at some time. Of the 17 year olds surveyed, 70% had consumed alcohol in the month prior to the survey and 49% had drunk in the previous week.⁵

How often do teenagers drink?

The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) *2007 National Drug Strategy Household Survey* provides the following details about the drinking patterns of 14 to 19-year-olds:

- 74% have drunk alcohol at least once
- 49% drink less than weekly
- 21% drink weekly
- 1% drink on a daily basis.⁶

The Australian secondary school students' use of alcohol in 2005 report found very similar results.⁵



How often do 14 to 19-year-olds drink?

How much do teenagers drink?

Most young people do not drink excessively. However, a significant number of teenage drinkers are inclined to "binge" drink. This means that they drink heavily over a short period of time with the intention of becoming intoxicated. Binge drinking results in immediate and severe intoxication. As well as posing a risk to health, it can lead to risk taking and dangerous behaviours. The after-effects of this sort of drinking commonly include hangovers, headaches, shakiness, nausea and vomiting.

It's easy for young people to think that, because they don't drink very often, one big night isn't going to do them any harm. In fact they are putting themselves at risk of injury or death. One Australian teenager dies and 60 are hospitalised each week from alcohol-related causes.⁷

Influences on teenage drinking patterns

There are a number of key influences that encourage teenage drinking. These include:

- wanting to be grown up and imitate adult behaviour; alcohol is often seen as a rite of passage to adulthood
- wanting to try new experiences and satisfy curiosity or reduce boredom
- wanting to socialise with friends
- wanting to relax, feel good or seek excitement
- peer-group pressure or to fit in to friendship groups
- wanting to escape from family problems
- not feeling very good about oneself
- being influenced by the media to see drinking as "cool" and as a normal activity.

Alcohol is socially acceptable

Alcohol is widely used and enjoyed in Australian society. It is served in many social and recreational situations, and its use is often encouraged. Drinking alcohol is not only an accepted part of Australian culture but it is often seen as intrinsic to the culture.⁸ It is almost

regarded as "unAustralian" to refuse a drink. This places considerable pressure and expectation on some young people to drink. "Young people perceive that alcohol is an integral part of adult life and that part of becoming an adult is learning how to drink."⁹

Alcohol use is also seen widely in the media. Drinking is portrayed positively in popular television, in advertisements and on the Internet. Teenagers see young, beautiful, happy and successful people in advertisements for alcohol and want to be like them. Alcohol companies have invested heavily in new media and consequently have impressive websites with state-of-the-art animations, downloadable video promotions, mobile phone ringtones, competitions and games. They advertise at sporting and cultural events and on social networking sites such as Facebook and Myspace. They have a strong presence on YouTube.

While flooded with these positive images of alcohol, adolescents are not nearly as often exposed to the negative effects of drinking.

Binge-drinking culture

Binge drinking has become a large part of youth culture. Teenagers see highly publicised and sensationalised reports of celebrities and sporting stars binge drinking. They are familiar with large public celebrations such as the annual

“schoolies” week, where one of the main preoccupations is drinking. Binge drinking gives young people instant “cred” and gets them lots of attention.

Family influences

Parents and families are important role models for young people. Adolescents are less likely to drink and engage in binge drinking if parents actively disapprove. Once adolescents start experimenting with alcohol, enhanced parental monitoring is seen as the most effective strategy to minimise the risks of the person drinking at risky levels. Once adolescents start to drink, siblings and friends influence their drinking habits more than drinking by parents.

Young adults as teenage role models

Teenagers tend to regard those in the age group just above their own as role models and it is likely that the drinking patterns of 18 to 24-year-olds will have an influence on them. The *2007 National Drug Strategy Household Survey* suggests that people in the group aged 18 to 24 are drinking at levels that increase the risks of doing long-term harm to themselves and a survey conducted in Victoria in 2004 concluded that 48% of 18 to 24-year-olds were drinking at levels that placed them at risk of short-term harm.¹⁰

Friends and peers

Alcohol consumption by teenagers is generally a group activity and few drink alone. Half the teenagers interviewed for the National Alcohol Campaign research had drunk with five or more peers on their last drinking occasion and 37% had drunk with seven or more peers.¹¹

Although young people often reject the idea that they are pressured by their peers into drinking alcohol, many give “peer pressure” as a reason for drinking. “Young people prefer to drink alcohol with their friends and although they do not consider that they are pressured into drinking, it is unlikely they will choose not to drink if their friends are drinking.”⁹

Given that the reasons for drinking are complex, research suggests that “peer pressure” may be a misleading term. For example, young people may actively seek out groups where risk taking is common, rather than being pressured into drinking.

Establishing an identity

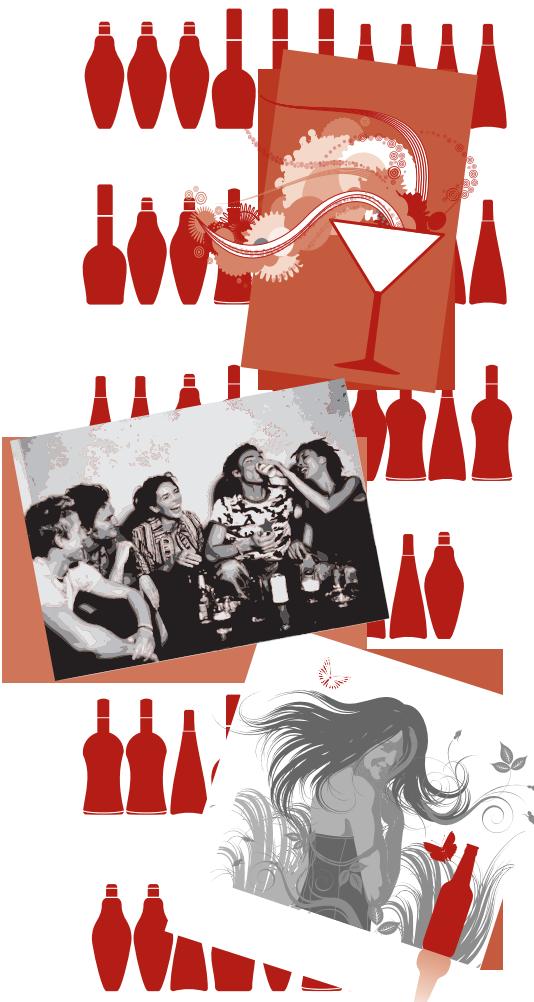
Teenagers say that one of the reasons they drink is to try new experiences. They want to try out different ways of being in the world, in order to begin working out an identity as an independent individual. Taking risks and learning their limits in various ways, including experimenting with alcohol, is common.

Alcohol marketing

The general public fails to appreciate the potential effect on young people of the widespread presence of alcohol images. This may be because people have become desensitised through constant exposure to the advertising.

The techniques used to market alcohol have changed considerably in recent years. Much of the marketing, advertising and promotion specifically targets young people. Reports by the ADF's Centre for Youth Drug Studies highlight the following concerns:

- Alcohol products are often associated in advertisements with sexual, social and sporting success, which contravenes the guidelines set out under the Alcoholic Beverages Advertising Code.
- Regular and/or excessive consumption of alcohol is increasingly portrayed on commercial television during times when a teenage audience is likely to be watching. On popular television alcohol is generally consumed in the context of social interaction; however, other factors motivate alcohol consumption. Characters drink to console themselves, to ease their nerves and to alleviate awkward situations. Most main characters drink alcohol regularly.
- Many Internet sites for alcohol products are youth oriented with features such as games, free downloads, videos and music.

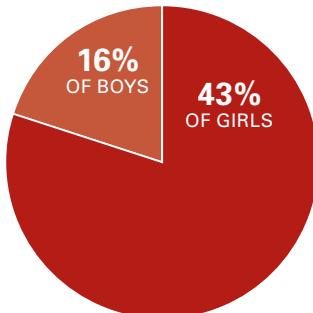


Teenagers are exposed to alcohol through massive sophisticated marketing campaigns and popular television programs aimed at a teenager audience.

- Alcohol advertisements in magazines use colour and sexual imagery to appeal to young people. While the messages conveyed are open to interpretation, advertisements have the potential to communicate dangerous messages to young people about alcohol use.
- Public transport and billboards carry highly visible advertisements for alcohol that may be more difficult to ignore than other media. The presence of alcohol advertisements on bus stops, tram stops, buses and trams is cause for concern given the frequency with which young people use public transport.
- Event sponsorship by alcohol companies is widespread. Virtually every national sporting event in Australia is associated with alcohol through sponsorship.
- Alcohol products that are sweeter and taste less like alcohol make it easier for young people to drink alcohol in large amounts.

Premixed drinks/alcopops

In recent years, heavy marketing has led to a change in the types of alcohol consumed by young people. Rather than drinking beer and wine, more young people are drinking premixed spirits. This is of particular concern because the alcohol content in some premixed drinks is higher than for the equivalent amount of beer.

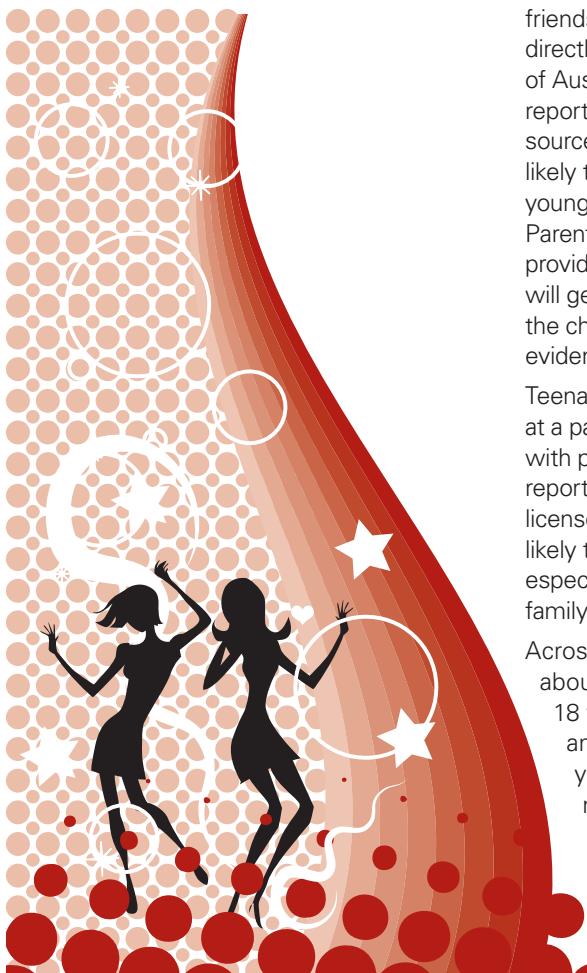


***Popularity of premixed spirits
for 12 to 15-year-olds.***

"Unpublished data sourced from the 2004 National Drug Strategy Household Survey shows that 77% of females and 73% of males aged 14–19 years who drink at "risky or high-risk levels for short-term harm" consume premixed spirits as much, or more, than any other alcoholic beverages."¹²

Teenagers prefer premixed drinks because they are more palatable; they are sweet and they mask the taste of alcohol. In 2005, these types of drinks were the choice of 43% of girls aged 12–15 years and 16% of boys of the same age.⁵ It has been found that the popularity of premixed spirits falls as people get older.

» Most teenagers obtain alcohol through friends or relatives.



Teenagers may be exposed to alcohol at parties or other social events.

How do teenagers obtain alcohol?

Most teenagers obtain alcohol through friends or relatives, although some purchase directly from outlets. Thirty-seven per cent of Australian secondary school students report that parents are the most common source of supply, with parents being more likely to be the main source of alcohol to younger students than to older students.⁵ Parents mistakenly believe that if they don't provide their teenagers with alcohol they will get it elsewhere and this will increase the chance of binge drinking. There is no evidence to support this.

Teenagers mostly drink at a friend's house, at a party or at home with parents or with parents' friends. Very few teenagers reported drinking in public spaces or at licensed venues. Young people are more likely to consume more alcohol at parties, especially unsupervised parties, than at family occasions in the home.

Across Australia there are special laws about alcohol and people aged under 18 years. These laws vary in each state and territory and depend on where your party is held. For example, it is not illegal for a person aged under 18 years to drink alcohol in their own home. However, in some states and territories, it is an offence to supply other people's children with alcohol unless the parent or guardian of the young person has authorised it.

The risks

The risks associated with drinking can be far greater for young people than for adults because they are more susceptible to the effects of alcohol due to their relative physical and emotional immaturity. When young people use alcohol, they face physical, emotional and legal repercussions, as well as negative effects on study, employment and relationships.

Starting to use alcohol at a young age has been shown to increase the likelihood of negative physical and mental health problems, social problems and alcohol dependence.¹³

Using alcohol as a young person does not mean that teenagers will "grow out of it" and drink less as adults. In fact, once they start to use alcohol, a considerable proportion of young people report drinking on a regular basis. People who start to drink alcohol early in life face an increased risk of experiencing problems with alcohol later in life.¹⁴

Short-term harms

Possible short-term or immediate harms related to risky and high-risk drinking on any one occasion include:

- increase in risk-taking behaviour
- involvement with drink-driving or motor vehicle accidents as driver, passenger or pedestrian
- injury and accident, including drowning
- aggression
- violence as the victim or perpetrator
- self-harm
- sexual risk taking, including unprotected and/or unwanted sexual activity
- increased use of tobacco and other drugs
- alcohol poisoning/overdose.

Long-term harms

Long term or chronic harms related to regular drinking over a long period of time include:

- impaired school and work performance and/or attendance
- legal and financial problems
- impaired brain development
- harm to health (e.g. cirrhosis, fertility problems)
- alcohol dependence.



Changes in brain function that occur during adolescence mean that alcohol affects teenagers differently from the way it affects adults.

Injury/violence

Drinking alcohol has been associated with risk of injury in many settings, including car accidents, falls, land and water sports, recreational activities and violence. Alcohol can increase the likelihood of accidents because of its effects on reaction time, reasoning, coordination, care and judgement.

The effect of alcohol on factors such as self-control and impulsivity reduces the ability to resolve conflicts in non-violent ways. Heavy drinking is also a major risk factor for self-harm.

Young people are at increased risk of injury or violence related to alcohol use because they are more vulnerable to the effects of alcohol due to their stage of physical development and inexperience with drinking.

Brain development

Changes in brain function that occur during adolescence mean that alcohol affects teenagers differently from the way it affects adults. When teenagers drink alcohol they are less sensitive to

the coordination problems and sedative effects of alcohol, which means that they can stay awake and drink for longer than adults. However, they are more sensitive to the memory and learning problems caused by alcohol, which may lead to memory problems, lack of judgement and blackouts.

Heavy drinking in adolescence is also likely to have a negative effect on healthy brain development. The human brain is still developing until the mid-20s. Alcohol is a neurotoxin and can disrupt important changes that are occurring in the brain during this period. This may lead to learning difficulties and reduced performance on attention-based testing.

Alcohol dependency

There is growing evidence that the use of a substance such as alcohol at an early age is associated with using it more frequently in later life and experiencing problems with it.^{13,14} This could be related to the changes that are occurring in the adolescent brain.

A further sub-group of teenage drinkers does not become dependent, but continues to drink alcohol at risky or high-risk levels; therefore, it is dangerous to assume that all teenagers who drink heavily will "grow out of it".

Mental illness

In the past decade some research has found links between the early onset of substance misuse with later mental health problems. There is evidence that teenagers who misuse alcohol have higher rates of mental disorders and attempted suicide.¹⁵

There may be a number of causes for this:

- A young person with a mental illness may drink alcohol for the same reasons as other people: curiosity, boredom, to have a good time, in social situations or to cope with problems.
- Alcohol may be used to help cope with the symptoms of mental illness. This can develop into problematic use.
- Alcohol use may adversely affect a young person's family, school and social life. These issues may increase the risk of depression or anxiety.
- Some risk factors are common to both developing a mental illness and alcohol or other drug dependence. These may be physiological, genetic, social or environmental.



Misuse of alcohol can not only affect your moods and judgement in a negative way, there is also evidence of a higher risk of mental health problems.

Differences between teenage boys and girls

The 2007 *National Drug Strategy Household Survey* found that females in the 14–19 age group were more likely than their male counterparts to consume alcohol at risky or high-risk levels for long-term harm.⁶ Physical and developmental differences between girls and boys have immediate and longer term implications when considering the effects of alcohol use.

- Most drugs, including alcohol, have a stronger effect on adolescent girls than on boys; therefore, there are more significant physical consequences for them.
- Girls are more sensitive to alcohol at some times of the menstrual cycle.
- Girls are more likely to experience blackouts after drinking alcohol.
- There is an association between the earlier onset of puberty in girls with a younger age for the initiation of drinking and smoking.
- Late developing boys are more likely to start drinking at an early age in order to participate in what is perceived as a “higher status” activity.¹⁶



Certain factors can mean that girls are more sensitive to alcohol than boys of the same age.

Advice for parents

Parents may feel that they have no influence on their teenagers' lives but this is not the case. Parents' attitudes and behaviours have an important influence on young people and their decisions.

It is never too early to start talking to children about alcohol. Parents who are able to communicate openly with their children about alcohol are more likely to influence their child's attitudes towards the use of alcohol.

Some tips for parents include:

- Expressing disapproval of drinking has been shown to postpone the onset of alcohol use by adolescents.
- Don't be afraid to keep tabs on your teenager. Monitoring your teenagers' whereabouts is the most effective strategy to minimise the risks of them drinking at risky levels.
- Parents mistakenly believe that if they don't provide their teenagers with alcohol they will get it elsewhere and this will increase the chance of binge drinking. There is no evidence to support this.
- Parents and families are important role models for young people. Parents should set an example that they want their children to follow.

In order to avoid problems with alcohol later in life teenagers should be encouraged to:

- delay the age of initial drinking
- not progress to regular drinking
- minimise or reduce risky and harmful drinking patterns.¹⁷

The Australian Drug Foundation has many resources that provide advice to parents (see page 17).

The Australian Government has produced a very helpful guide for parents called *Teenagers and alcohol: A guide for parents*. It can be downloaded from their website at www.alcohol.gov.au



Open communication with your teenager is likely to influence attitudes to alcohol.

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Where do I go for further information?

The following resources are available from the ADF's DrugInfo Clearinghouse. You can obtain a copies by calling 1300 85 85 84 or www.druginfo.adf.org.au

Pamphlets

Dealing with alcohol use: A guide for parents

Alcohol and your body

Fact sheets

Alcohol promotion and young people

How alcohol affects teenagers

Teenagers and alcohol: a quick guide for parents

The facts about binge drinking

Why it's dumb to drink when you're a teenager

Alcohol and other drug information services and parent lines are listed on the back of this booklet.

Alcohol and drug information services and parent lines in your state or territory

For information, counselling, advice and other assistance, contact:

Australia-wide

Family Drug Support:
1300 368 186 (toll-free)

CounsellingOnline:
www.counsellingonline.org.au

Australian Capital Territory

Alcohol and drugs:
(02) 6207 9977

Parent advice:
(02) 6287 3833

New South Wales

Alcohol and drugs:
(02) 9361 8000

1800 422 599 (toll-free outside Sydney)

Parent advice:
13 20 55 (toll-free)

Northern Territory

Alcohol and drugs:
1800 131 350 (toll-free)

Parent advice:
1300 301 300

Queensland

Alcohol and drugs:
1800 177 833 (toll-free)

Parent advice:
1300 301 300

South Australia

Alcohol and drugs:
1300 131 340 (toll-free)

Parent advice:
1300 364 100 (toll-free)

Tasmania

Alcohol and drugs:
1800 811 994 (toll-free)

Parent advice:
1300 808 178 (toll-free)

Victoria

Alcohol and drugs:
1300 85 85 84 (information, toll-free)

1800 888 236 (counselling, toll-free)

Family Drug Help:
1300 660 068 (toll-free)

Parent advice:
13 22 89

Western Australia

Alcohol and drugs:
(08) 9442 5000

1800 198 024 (toll-free outside Perth)

Parent advice:
1800 654 432 (toll-free)