Alcohol and Young People: Is teenage drinking really a problem?

How much do young people drink?

By the age of 12, around 73% of students have tried alcohol, increasing to around 80% by age 13, 86% by age 14, and 91% by age 15.¹

The proportion of students reporting drinking in the week prior to the 2005 Australian School Students Alcohol and Drugs Survey also increased steadily with age, from 10% of 12-year-olds to 27% of 14-year-olds and 49% of 17-year-olds.¹

The most recent National Drug Strategy Household Survey found that 71% of people aged 14-19 had consumed alcohol in the last 12 months, with 20.9% consuming alcohol weekly.² Among underage drinkers, 29.8% of 12-15 year olds and 72.7% of 16-17 year olds had consumed alcohol in the last 12 months; and 1.0% and 20.0% respectively consumed alcohol weekly.²

Alarming is, 30% of 15-year-olds and 44% of 17-year-olds reported consuming at levels that placed them at risk of alcohol-related harm (i.e., drinking seven or more standard drinks on one day for males and five or more for females) in the last week. However, it is important to note that the majority of young people are not drinking regularly, and that not drinking is the ‘norm’ for young people, especially those under 16.

What are the consequences?

In 2007, more than one-quarter of 14-19 year olds reported putting themselves as risk of alcohol-related harm at least once a month during the last year, with the incidence being higher for females (28.3%) than males (24.5%).²

This continues into young adulthood, with 39.6% of 20-29 year olds putting themselves at risk of alcohol-related harm at least once a month, although in this group the rates are higher for males (43.8%) than females (35.3%).²

As well as the obvious long-term risks associated with excessive alcohol consumption, binge-drinking is associated with a range of short-term risks including alcohol poisoning, unsafe sex, sexual assault, physical violence, motor vehicle accidents, property damage and other criminal activities.³,⁴,⁵,⁶,⁷

It has been estimated that over 80% of all alcohol consumed by 14-17 year olds is drunk at a level that poses short-term risk of injury.³ Each year over 3,000 under-aged drinkers are hospitalised for alcohol-attributable injury in Australia.³

Between 1993 and 2002, over 2,500 young people aged between 15 and 24 years died from alcohol-attributable injury and disease and more than 100,000 were hospitalised.³

Key Points

- Nine out of ten 15 year olds have tried alcohol
- Over a quarter of 14 year olds, and half of 17 year olds, are drinking alcohol weekly
- More than one-quarter of 14-19 year olds put themselves as risk of alcohol-related harm at least once a month
- Research shows that in Australia over the past two decades, more young people are drinking alcohol, drinking at an earlier age, and adopting high risk drinking patterns
- Between 1993 and 2002, over 2,500 young people aged between 15 and 24 years died from alcohol-attributable injury and disease and more than 100,000 were hospitalised

What Can I Do?

- Talk to your children about the risks of drinking
- Lobby for stricter regulations on the sale and promotion of alcohol
- Support initiatives that address Australia’s pro-alcohol culture

Other Fact Sheets in this Series

- ALC2: Alcohol & Young People: What Do Young People Drink?
- ALC3: Alcohol & Young People: Further Reading