

FARE FACT SHEET:

Young people and alcohol



We all want to do what we can to keep young people safe, including protecting them from harms that might result from drinking alcohol. This fact sheet provides information for parents, guardians and older siblings about alcohol and young people. Further information on where to find out more about this important topic is also included.

When is it ok for a young person to drink alcohol?

The National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) is Australia's peak organisation for supporting health and medical research and for developing health advice for Australians.¹ The NHMRC have produced guidelines on alcohol called the Australian Guidelines to Reduce Health Risks from Drinking Alcohol (Alcohol Guidelines), which provide information on how to reduce the risks from drinking alcohol. The Alcohol Guidelines recommend:

For children and young people under 18 years of age, not drinking alcohol is the safest option.

A. Parents and carers should be advised that children under 15 years of age are at the greatest risk of harm from drinking and that for this age group, not drinking alcohol is especially important.

B. For young people aged 15–17 years, the safest option is to delay the initiation of drinking for as long as possible.

Put simply, it is best for young people aged under 18 years to avoid drinking alcohol. It is also important to understand that young adults aged up to 25 years are also still at greater risk of alcohol-related harms. This is due to their lower tolerance of alcohol, greater risk of accidents and injuries, and increased risk of impairments to the still-developing brain.²

What are the risks for young people who drink alcohol?

Young people have a significantly lower tolerance to alcohol, meaning that they are more physically sensitive to the effects of alcohol consumption.³ Combined with emotional immaturity and relative inexperience at performing certain tasks that require attention and coordination, young people are at particularly high risk of alcohol-related harm.⁴

There are a number of short and long term risks associated with early alcohol use. These include:

- Physical injury;
- Increased risk taking and antisocial behaviour;
- Risky sexual behavior;
- Poor academic performance;
- Permanent damage to the structure and function of the developing brain;
- Mental health issues such as depression;
- Increased likelihood of illicit drug use, whether at the same time as the alcohol use or later in life; and
- Increased likelihood of later alcohol addiction.⁵

Alcohol consumption also contributes to the three leading causes of death among adolescents – unintentional injuries, homicide and suicide.⁶

Should alcohol be introduced to young people?

Some people believe that introducing alcohol to a young person in a controlled setting (e.g. at home with parents) will prevent irresponsible consumption later in life. We now know that introducing young people to alcohol is not the best way to keep them safe.

This is partly because the younger a child is introduced to alcohol, the more likely they are to develop alcohol problems later in life, regardless of the setting in which alcohol was introduced.⁷

If you do provide alcohol to a person under 18 years, it is important to be mindful of the laws regarding this. These laws vary across states and territories and they often change, so it is important that you check the local legislation before providing alcohol to a young person. More information on this can be found in the fact sheet entitled, "Young people, alcohol and the law".

How do I talk to a young person about alcohol?

Having an open discussion about alcohol with your child can help reduce the risk that they will experience alcohol-related harms. In having this conversation, you may find the following tips useful:

- Prior to having the conversation, assess your own attitudes and expectations about alcohol and prepare what you want to say and how to answer questions, including potentially difficult ones.
- Choose a time when both you and your child are relaxed, and ensure that the discussion is not perceived as a lecture.
- Tailor the talk to your child's age and maturity levels.
- Talk about the harms associated with alcohol use, including physical, social and psychological impacts in the long and short term (see above). Emphasise the short-term effects such as injuries and social embarrassment, as these are more likely to be a concern for young people.
- Encourage your child to tell you how they view alcohol and be prepared to address any misconceptions they may have about alcohol. These can include the incorrect perception that everyone their age drinks in order to fit in and have fun, and how myths about alcohol's positive effects are often perpetuated and glamourised by the media.
- Develop some rules and boundaries around alcohol, allowing input and collaboration with your child where appropriate. Emphasise that these rules are in place to protect them. The consequences for breaking these rules should be sufficiently tough to be a deterrent but not so harsh that you risk alienating your child. Administer these rules in a consistent manner to ensure they are taken seriously.
- Develop strategies for your child to resist peer pressures to drink alcohol. Emphasise that true friends will accept their decision not to drink.
- Ensure that you are aware of your child's whereabouts when they are not in the company of a responsible adult, as the risks of misusing alcohol increase. Ask them where they are going, what they will do and with whom. Set curfews and discuss ways of them getting home safely. Ensure that you are not overly strict as they may become more likely to be secretive and rebellious.⁸

If your child is in a situation where they may drink or is in a situation where they may be surrounded by drinkers:

- Ensure that there is adequate adult supervision at any party or social gathering they may attend.
- Help your child to develop strategies for managing or removing themselves from situations where there is alcohol misuse. Offer support where you can such as picking them up.
- Discuss how they can protect themselves against drink spiking and other dangers associated with not knowing where their drink came from.

- Warn your child of the dangers of getting into a car where the driver has been drinking, including when they themselves are the driver. Discuss a plan for when faced with a scenario where they may be tempted to ride with a drink driver, such as agreeing to pick them up or pay for a taxi.⁹

As a parent, modelling responsible and consistent behaviour around alcohol is essential in encouraging your child not to drink. This can be achieved by not getting visibly intoxicated in front of your children, not drinking and driving, and avoiding the depiction of alcohol as being fun, glamorous or a viable solution to dealing with stress or unhappiness.¹⁰

In all interactions about alcohol, it is important to encourage openness and honesty and reserve judgment as much as possible.^{11,12}

What do I do if I suspect a young person is misusing alcohol?

There is no definitive set of signs indicating that a young person is misusing alcohol. However, the following signs may indicate that there may be a problem, especially if observed in combination:

- Recurrent health complaints;
- Unusual mood patterns and changes, particularly irritability;
- Changes in sleeping patterns;
- Withdrawing from family;
- A drop in school performance, attendance and discipline; and
- Changes in friendship groups and social activities.¹³

The above signs may also arise from other physical or psychological problems, therefore you should consult with health professionals to rule these out first.

When raising the issue of alcohol misuse with your child, remain calm and listen to their side of the story. Tell them your concerns about how their alcohol use has put their health and safety at risk. If they have broken the law, convey to them how it can impact their future including employment opportunities. Ensure that they understand that it is the behaviour you don't approve of, not them as a person.

Consider using the services of a professional such as your GP or a counselor if you are not confident of your abilities to influence your child.

More useful contacts and links are listed below.¹⁴

Where do I go for more information or assistance?

You may require additional assistance in regards to talking to your child about alcohol, or supporting a young person who is or may be misusing alcohol. Included below are a number of useful contacts.

Advice on how to talk to your child about alcohol

- Australian Drug Foundation: The Other Talk: Let's talk about alcohol & drugs. <http://theothertalk.org.au/>
- Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing. Teenagers and alcohol: A guide for parents. [http://www.alcohol.gov.au/internet/alcohol/publishing.nsf/content/4576756CA5268C8ECA25719400181178/\\$File/brochure-teen-alcohol.pdf](http://www.alcohol.gov.au/internet/alcohol/publishing.nsf/content/4576756CA5268C8ECA25719400181178/$File/brochure-teen-alcohol.pdf)

Advice on what to do if your child is misusing alcohol

- Australian Capital Territory: Alcohol Drug Program - 24-hour confidential information, advice & referral - 02 6207 9977
- Victoria: Directline - 24 hour confidential information, advice and referral - 1800 888 236
- New South Wales: Alcohol Drug Information Service - Metropolitan - 02 9361 8000, Rural - 1800 422 599
- Tasmania: Alcohol Drug Information Service - 1800 811 994
- Northern Territory: Northern Territory Alcohol & Other Drug Services - 1800 131 350
- Western Australia: Alcohol Drug Information Service - Metropolitan - 08 9442 5000, Rural 1800 198 024
- South Australia: Alcohol Drug Information Service - Metropolitan - 08 8363 8618, Statewide - 1300 131 340
- Queensland: Alcohol Drug Information Service - Metropolitan - 07 3236 2414, Statewide - 1800 177 833

About the Foundation for Alcohol Research and Education

The Foundation for Alcohol Research and Education (FARE) is an independent charitable organisation working to prevent the harmful use of alcohol in Australia. Our mission is to help Australia change the way it drinks by:

- helping communities to prevent and reduce alcohol-related harms;
- building the case for alcohol policy reform; and
- engaging Australians in conversations about our drinking culture.

Over the last ten years FARE has invested more than \$115 million, helped 750 organisations and funded over 1,400 projects addressing the harms caused by alcohol misuse.

FARE is guided by the World Health Organisation's *Global Strategy to Reduce the Harmful Use of Alcohol* for addressing alcohol-related harms through population-based strategies, problem-directed policies, and direct interventions.

We need your help to continue our good work. Donations that are \$2 and over are tax deductible, make your secure online donation now at www.fare.org.au

References

¹ National Health Medical and Research Council. (2013). Accessed at: <http://www.nhmrc.gov.au/about>

² National Health Medical and Research Council. (2009). Australian Guidelines to Reduce Health Risks from Drinking Alcohol. Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ McMorris, B.J., Catalano, R.F., Kim, M.J., Toumbourou, J.W. and Hemphill, S.A. (2011). Influence of Family Factors and Supervised Alcohol Use on Adolescent Alcohol Use and Harms: Similarities Between Youth in Different Alcohol Policy Contexts. *Journal of Studies of Drugs and Alcohol*, 72(3), 418.

⁸ Parenting Strategies Program (2010). Parenting Guidelines for Adolescent Alcohol Use. Melbourne: Orygen Youth Health Research Centre, University of Melbourne.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing. (2006). Teenagers and alcohol: A guide for parents. Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia.

¹² Op.cit. no.8

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

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