

## Alcohol and Young People (up to about 18 years)

The ability of young people to cope with alcohol is reduced by their physical size and stage of development.

At the same time, research shows that in Australia over the past two decades, more young people are:

- drinking alcohol;
- drinking at an earlier age;
- increasingly adopting high risk drinking patterns; and
- at increased risk of alcohol-related injuries and accidental death, because they both:
  - lack experience of drinking and its effects and therefore have a reduced capacity to assess or regulate their drinking behaviours, and
  - often indulge in a range of risk-taking behaviours.

### Factors that place young people at increased risk of harm from drinking

- Children and adolescents have greater vulnerability to alcohol than adults do, because:
  - They are usually physically smaller.
  - They lack experience of drinking and its effects, and so have no basis for assessing or regulating their drinking.
  - They have not built up any tolerance to alcohol.
- Early adolescence is often accompanied by a range of risk-taking behaviours as adolescents explore independence, and peer values and norms take on a much greater importance. These factors can considerably heighten the risk associated with drinking.
- In later adolescence, risk-taking behaviour often includes potentially dangerous activities such as surfboard riding or abseiling, and alcohol can considerably increase the risk.
- Just finishing high school ('schoolies week') is often linked with episodes of very high levels of binge drinking, and or deliberately drinking to intoxication.

### Research into Australian patterns of drinking has found that:

Amongst those aged 14-17 years, who were surveyed in 2001:

- 64% of males and 69% of females were current drinkers.
- 21% of males and 25% of females drank at least once a month, at levels that placed them at risk of short-term harm.

### Young people are at greatest risk of immediate harm from the misuse of alcohol:

- The three leading causes of death among adolescents – unintentional injuries, homicide, and suicide – are all associated with alcohol.
- Between 1990 and 1997, over half of all serious alcohol-related road injuries (52%) in Australia were sustained by people aged 15-24 years.
- Loss of inhibitions and decision-making skills place young people at particular risk of violence, accidents and sexual coercion.
- Death by alcohol overdose is of particular concern among young drinkers. Their generally smaller physique means that their bodies process alcohol considerably more slowly and less efficiently than adult bodies do. In addition, young women process alcohol much less efficiently than males.



**Special safeguards are therefore needed for young people:**

- Young people should be assisted to develop understanding, attitudes and behaviour that enable them to minimise and avoid the harmful consequences associated with excessive alcohol use.
- Helping young people to learn about drinking and the effects of alcohol within a safe and supportive environment can help them manage their drinking in ways that minimise risk to themselves and others.
- Parents need to be encouraged and supported to discuss alcohol misuse with their children.

**Young people:**

- are especially urged not to drink beyond the levels set in the guidelines developed for low risk drinking by adults (and listed in the *What is a standard drink?* Fact Sheet);
- should not drink at all for at least several hours before undertaking potentially risky activities (eg driving, swimming, boating);
- should not mix alcohol with other mood altering drugs;
- can check alcohol-related laws on website [www.lawstuff.org.au](http://www.lawstuff.org.au)
- if they choose not to drink, should be supported in this decision;
- in settings where alcohol is available to them, should be supervised by adults at all times;
- should keep any drinking to a minimum;
- should not accept lifts from a drunk driver;
- most importantly, should not drink to become intoxicated.

To become responsible adult drinkers, a gradual, supervised introduction to alcohol is recommended.

- Particular attention should be paid to the settings in which young people drink. High risk drinking behaviours need to be separated from other risk-taking activities, including risky sexual behaviours, and from activities such as driving and water sports that not only involve risk but frequently also require a high degree of skill.
- Effective strategies need to support the Liquor Licensing legislation prohibiting the sale or supply of alcohol to people who are under 18 years of age.

**Other relevant Fact Sheets:**

- *Alcohol and young adults*
- *Alcohol and women's health*
- *Alcohol and men's health*
- *The effects of alcohol on the body*
- *Alcohol and the law*
- *Alcohol and the international scene*
- *Drinking patterns and levels of risk*
- *What is a standard drink?*

**Principal source**

National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) (2001). *Australian Alcohol Guidelines: Health Risks and Benefits*. NHMRC, Canberra.

**Other sources**

*National Alcohol Strategy: A Plan for Action 2001 to 2003-04*. (2001) Commonwealth Department of Health and Aged Care, Canberra.

National Drug Strategy Household Survey 2001 – Unpublished Data Set. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, Canberra.

