

Teenagers and alcohol – an unhealthy combination

The Health Column

28 Jan
2015

This time of year the calendar is filled with social engagements and parties. Many teenagers will spend much of the school holiday period celebrating and spending time with their friends. Many of these functions will involve alcohol.

A survey by the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) found that 90% of Australian secondary school students have tried alcohol by the age of 14. Around 70% of 17-year-olds had consumed alcohol in the month before the survey.



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Alcohol acts as a central nervous system (CNS) depressant. Alcohol-related harm comes from a combination of the amount of alcohol consumed and various other factors such as age, gender, body size, nutrition, drinking experience and social factors. Alcohol consumption affects not only the person drinking, but everyone in the community. It is estimated that alcohol costs the Australian community over \$15 billion a year. These costs relate to health problems, accidents, crime, violence, social issues, and loss of productivity.

The *Australian Guidelines to Reduce Health Risks from Drinking* state that ‘for children and young people under 18 years of age, not drinking is the safest option’ and that ‘children under 15 years of age are at greatest risk of harm from drinking.’ These guidelines are based on health risks to teenagers however there are also legal and social risks.

For adolescents, drinking alcohol contributes to the three leading causes of death for this age group – unintentional injuries, homicide, and suicide. In addition over 50% of alcohol-related serious road injuries occur in the 15–24-year-old age bracket. According to the NHMRC, alcohol consumption in teenagers also contributes to physical injuries, risky sexual behaviour, anti-social behaviour and poor academic performance. Studies show the earlier alcohol consumption starts, the greater the chance of becoming a regular drinker and the greater the likelihood of adverse physical and mental health conditions/consequences.

Every year, ‘schoolies’ events are covered in the media. Many of the incidents highlight the immediate negative consequences that can occur from binge drinking, such as physical injury from alcohol-fuelled violence. Developmental and social issues for the teenager, their peers and their family can be less obvious as they arise over time.

Parents, and other significant adults, can positively influence teenagers to make wise choices regarding alcohol, and help them to reduce the risk of harm from alcohol. These adults can help even if the teenager has already started drinking.

The *Guidelines for Alcohol Consumption for Young People*, released by the Australian Government, suggest:

- Setting a good example through own alcohol behaviours.
- Rewarding responsible behaviour and attitudes towards alcohol.
- Talking about strategies to deal with peer pressure regarding alcohol.
- Discussing the alcohol-related health issues as well as the legal consequences.

It is often said Australians love a drink. We can also show love for our children by helping them to avoid the harm alcohol can cause them when drinking starts at an early age.

Your local community pharmacy is your health destination. Your local pharmacist can give you more information about the effects of alcohol, including interactions with medications, and where to seek counselling about alcohol-related problems.

You can get more detailed information on alcohol from the Self Care Fact Card titled *Alcohol* available from pharmacies providing the Pharmaceutical Society of Australia's Self Care health information.

For the nearest Self Care pharmacy location phone the Pharmaceutical Society of Australia on 1300 369 772, or go to www.psa.org.au 'Supporting practice' then 'Self Care', and then 'Find a Self Care pharmacy'.