

## Teenagers and alcohol – an unhealthy combination

### *The Health Column*

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At 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.

An Australian survey in 2013 found that the average age at which young people aged 14-24 first tried alcohol is 15.7. Approximately 86% of Australians 14 years of age and over have drunk alcohol at least once in their lives.



Alcohol acts as a central nervous system (CNS) depressant. The effect of alcohol comes from a combination of factors, including the amount of alcohol consumed and various other factors such as age, gender, body size, nutrition, and drinking experience. 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 Alcohol* state 'for children and young people under 18 years of age, not drinking alcohol is the safest option' and that 'children under 15 years of age are at the 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 National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC), alcohol consumption in teenagers also contributes to physical injuries, risky sexual behaviour, antisocial behaviour, and poor academic performance. Studies show the earlier alcohol consumption starts, the greater the chance of developing problems with alcohol later in life, 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.

Some useful tips include:

- setting a good example through their own alcohol behaviours
- rewarding responsible behaviour and attitudes towards alcohol
- talking about strategies to deal with peer pressure regarding alcohol
- discussing alcohol-related health issues as well as alcohol laws and the potential consequences for breaking them.

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.

'Febfast' is a month-long health challenge and fundraiser, and an opportunity for you to get your health and body back on track after the excesses of the silly season. 'Febfast' is a community of Australians who have committed to taking a pause from alcohol, sugar, or something else of your own choice for the month of February, to feel healthier and raise vital funds for young people facing disadvantage. Consider 'febfast' – a pause for the better – as February approaches. At: [febfast.org.au](http://febfast.org.au).

Your local community pharmacy is your health destination. Your local pharmacist can give you more information about the effects of alcohol, including interactions with medicines, 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/selfcare](http://www.psa.org.au/selfcare), then click 'Find a *Self Care pharmacy* near you'.