

How alcohol causes harm to teenagers

Risk of accident, injury and antisocial behaviour

Drinking contributes to the three leading causes of death among adolescents. In an American study one in ten teens reported being influenced by alcohol during a fight. This same group were also more likely to injure themselves or others during the fight. The prevalence of risk-taking behaviours increases in adolescence and the likelihood of injury increases further still when alcohol is also involved.

Harmful adult drinking behaviour

The evidence suggests that earlier initiation of drinking is related to more frequent and higher quantity alcohol consumption in adolescence, and these patterns are in turn related to the development of alcohol-related harms in adolescence and adulthood.

Mental health harm

Alcohol use, especially when initiated at a young age, elevates the risk of many mental health issues and social problems. The nature of the relationship between alcohol use and mental health issues in adolescence is somewhat reciprocal. Young people with certain mental health disorders are more likely to initiate alcohol use and accelerate their use throughout adolescence. In turn, alcohol use may contribute to poor mental health. One of the major complications of teenage alcohol use is self-harm, having suicidal thoughts and suicide, especially in teens with major depression.

The family environment and parental rules

Parental norms for alcohol use are not static and are likely to change with teenage development. Even without actually providing alcohol to their child, parents can play a role by setting the environmental context in which drinking might occur. It is estimated that 13% of Australian children aged 12 years or less are exposed to an adult who is a regular binge drinker. Parents drinking in front of children can display to kids pro-alcohol attitudes.

Parents imposing strict rules related to teenage alcohol use is overwhelmingly associated with less drinking and fewer alcohol-related risky behaviours. Studies have found more teenagers' chose not to drink alcohol if parents did not permit them to drink at home or did not provide them with alcohol to take to parties or social events. The later permission was delayed, the less likely teenagers were to consume alcohol.

Delaying the age that your child starts to drink alcohol (initiation) is a protective factor against harm. There are several predictors of delayed alcohol initiation and lower levels of later drinking. They include:

- parental modelling of drinking behaviour
- alcohol-specific communication
- disapproval of teenage drinking
- rules about alcohol
- parental monitoring
- parent-child relationship quality
- family conflict, parental support
- parental involvement
- general communication.

Benefits of parents choosing to delay teenage alcohol use until 18 years of age

The initiation of alcohol use at a young age may increase the likelihood of negative physical and mental health conditions, social problems and alcohol dependence. Once teens begin drinking, many become regular consumers of alcohol.

There is some evidence to suggest that the later teenagers delay their first alcoholic drink, the less likely they are to become regular consumers of alcohol, and delaying the onset of drinking reduces consumption levels in adulthood.

When parents do supply alcohol, studies have found this also increased the probability of the teens risky drinking. A recent Australian study found adolescents who were supplied alcohol by parents had higher odds of drinking whole drinks than those not supplied by parents. Parental supply was still associated with a doubling of the odds of drinking.

Providing alcohol to children is associated with alcohol-related harms. There is no evidence to support the view that parental supply protects from adverse drinking outcomes by providing alcohol to their child. A longitudinal study found that adolescents in their mid-teens were 2.7 times more likely to drink full serves of alcoholic beverages if their parents had been supplying them with alcohol in their early teen years.



Teenagers have greater vulnerabilities to the effects of alcohol, and this can impact them now, and as an adult. Alcohol consumption by teenagers can see harmful drinking behaviour as an adult and cause permanent damage to the developing brain.

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The Australian Guidelines to Reduce Health Risks from Drinking Alcohol underlined the importance of delaying the initiation of drinking for as long as possible as a key factor in limiting alcohol related health issues during a person's lifetime.

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I need you to say no

No one should give alcohol to under 18s.

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