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For parents

Young people and alcohol

Introduction

In 2009 the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) released the *Australian guidelines to reduce health risks from drinking alcohol*, to help people make informed decisions about their drinking. The new guidelines outline the level of risk associated with drinking alcohol. These updated guidelines include the recommendation that for children and young people under 18 years of age, not drinking is the safest option.

This fact sheet provides information for parents about the NHMRC's guidelines for young people. This information aims to help parents understand why the recommendation of not drinking was made and provides some suggestions about how parents can educate their children about alcohol and help reduce the risk of harm.

What do the guidelines say?

The *Australian guidelines to reduce health risks from drinking alcohol* recommend that for children and young people under 18 years of age, not drinking is the safest option.

- › Parents and carers are advised that young people under the age of 15 years are at greatest risk of harm from drinking and it is especially important that they do not drink alcohol.
- › Young people aged 15–17 years should delay their first drink for as long as possible.

If young people aged 15–17 years choose to drink they should be in a safe environment, supervised by adults and stay within the adult guidelines.

Healthy men and women aged over 18 years:

- › should drink no more than two standard drinks on any day to reduce the risk of an alcohol-related injury or disease during their lifetime
- › should drink no more than four standard drinks on any one occasion to reduce the risk of an immediate alcohol-related injury.

Why should young people avoid alcohol?

The alcohol guidelines were developed by using scientific evidence from a range of sources such as research, hospital information and survey results. This information was used to make an assessment of the potential alcohol-related harms (such as injury and disease) that people may experience from drinking.

The recommendation that young people should not drink is based on a range of evidence.

Risk of injury and self harm

“Drinking contributes to the three leading causes of death amongst adolescents—unintentional injuries, homicide and suicide (Stephens 2006, Miller et al 2007)”

(NHMRC 2009, p. 58)

Dangerous and antisocial behaviour is more likely among people under 15 years of age when they drink than older drinkers. It is also higher among 15–17 year olds when they drink than older drinkers. For example, the evidence indicates that drinking alcohol when young is associated with risky behaviours such as:

- › riding in a car with a driver affected by alcohol
- › risky sexual behaviour and increased risk of sexual coercion
- › violence
- › using illicit drugs
- › self harm.

Young people are also generally smaller, have a lower tolerance for alcohol and tend to drink spirits, all of which can contribute to the risk of death due to an alcohol overdose.

Effect on brain development

During adolescence the brain continues to develop and undergoes many changes. There is some emerging evidence that drinking alcohol may affect how the brain develops.

When compared to young people who do not drink, the brain development of young people with alcohol-use disorders shows several differences. These differences are in areas of the brain that are involved in decision making, memory and emotions. This could affect a young person's:

- › memory
- › ability to learn
- › problem solving skills
- › mood and mental health (e.g. depression).

Mental health

Drinking alcohol raises the risk of developing mental health and social problems, especially when a person starts drinking at a young age.

The relationship between drinking alcohol and mental health is complex, for example, evidence suggest that:

- › young people with certain mental health issues are more likely to start drinking and drink at high levels.
- › young people who drink to cope with their problems are more likely to suffer from mental health issues such as depression.

Age young people start to drink

The younger a person starts drinking the more likely they are to drink more, and more often, during adolescence, which could lead to alcohol-related harms during adolescence and later in life.

Research suggests that young people who were drinking before 18 years of age were at increased risk of:

- › being a heavy drinker later in life
- › experiencing alcohol dependence (addiction).

What can parents do?

While young people are influenced by many groups, such as the media, their friends and siblings, parents continue to be a great influence. Parents can play an important role in their children's attitudes towards, and use of, alcohol.

Delay your child's first drink for as long as possible to reduce the risk of them experiencing alcohol-related harm.

Be informed and talk to them about alcohol.

Do some research to make sure that you understand the risks of drinking alcohol, then talk to your child about it. For example, show them what a "standard drink" is and

talk about alcohol-related issues such as the effects, the law, safety, drink spiking and what can happen if someone drinks too much. If you do not know an answer, research it together; do not make up information or exaggerate.

Keep communication channels open. Most children will not have a problem with alcohol. A supportive family environment, where young people can openly discuss difficult issues and ask questions helps to reduce the risk of problems occurring. If a problem does arise, a good supportive relationship with your child may place you in a better position to help them.

Set a good example. Be aware of how you speak about, behave around and use alcohol. It is important to show your child how to drink responsibly and in moderation.

Provide fair and consistent guidelines. It is useful to establish some agreements about acceptable behaviour in relation to alcohol. You could start this discussion by chatting about each other's expectations. If everyone participates in setting the guidelines it is more likely that they will follow them. Agree on consequences should the guidelines be broken. It is important that consequences be followed through.

Be involved in their lives. Get to know their friends, so that you always know who they are with and where they are going. Make an effort to know their friends' parents and find out what their guidelines around alcohol are. You may find that many parents have the same concerns about alcohol that you do.

Help them to deal with peer pressure. Warn them of the dangers of rushing into making a decision and help them to think about what they can say to anyone who offers them alcohol.

More information

- › For more information about the *Australian guidelines to reduce health risks* from drinking alcohol visit www.alcohol.gov.au.
- › If you are worried about the amount you or a family member is drinking, and would like help, see your family doctor or contact the alcohol and other drug service in your state or territory www.druginfo.adf.org.au/browse.asp?ContainerID=support.
- › For more information on drugs and drug prevention contact the DrugInfo Clearinghouse on tel. 1300 85 85 84, email druginfo@adf.org.au.

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