



Australian Government

Department of Health and Ageing

Teenagers and Alcohol: A Guide for Parents

www.alcohol.gov.au



listen

honest

**right
time**

talk

**stay
cool**

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When children become teenagers, they usually want to spend more time with their friends and will often find themselves in places where others are drinking alcohol. This booklet contains information to help parents and guardians discuss and manage alcohol use by teenagers.

Do parents matter?

Sometimes parents feel they are no longer an important influence in their teenagers' lives, and that their children's decisions about alcohol use are beyond their control. This is not the case. While they are not the **only** influence in teenagers' lives, what parents do, what they believe and what they say to their children has an important influence on young people's decisions.

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Why is alcohol use by teenagers considered risky?

Alcohol is a potent drug that depresses the central nervous system and changes the way people think and feel. Teenagers can be more vulnerable to the effects of alcohol because they have not built up physical tolerance. They also lack



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drinking experience and are less able to judge their own levels of intoxication. Most young people are smaller than adults and so alcohol can have a greater effect. There is some new evidence that developing minds and bodies may be more vulnerable to the negative effects of alcohol. The earlier a young person begins unsupervised drinking, the greater the risk of alcohol-related problems in later life.

What harm can happen?

Alcohol can have many consequences, including accidents, health problems and social problems. Alcohol-related problems are affected by things such as where the alcohol is consumed, who people are with when they drink, how easy it is to obtain alcohol, cultural influences, and individual characteristics (eg, their biology or personality).

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Intoxication and hangover problems (the immediate effects of drinking) include poor decision-making, greater risk of sexual assault, injuries, drink driving, aggressive behaviour and violence, and poor school performance. These problems can occur for anyone who drinks to the point of getting drunk on any single occasion, like a Saturday night party. They can also affect those who are in the company of people who are drinking.

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Over a longer period of regular drinking, other problems can occur. Long term damage from drinking more than the limit set by the *Australian Alcohol Guidelines* (see later) includes liver disease, some cancers (including breast cancer) heart disease and brain damage. While these are not common problems for young people, they are a risk for some. Regular use may also result in social and financial hardship.

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The time and place where people drink, and the person themselves, can make a difference. For example, an adult male who drinks two to three mid-strength beers a day, four times a week may be relatively low risk. However, if he drinks on an empty stomach before driving a car, the risk increases. A woman drinking two or three mid-strength drinks a few days a week may be comparatively low risk, unless she drinks just before

surfing or skateboarding. A young person who occasionally has one drink at home with a meal has much lower risk than a young person who regularly drinks and drives.

Most of the alcohol problems for young people occur due to intoxication. These include:

- Being the victim of violence (physical or verbal) or being violent themselves;
- Having unprotected sex or not being able to deal with unwanted sexual advances;
- Being sexually assaulted;
- Alcohol poisoning and loss of consciousness;
- Being injured while swimming, playing sport, climbing, even trying to cross a busy street, and the dangers of drink-driving are well known;
- Difficulty coping with school and/or work commitments;
- Having money problems because of the amount spent on alcohol;
- Breaking the law or getting into trouble with the police;
- Losing control of themselves and harming friendships; and/or
- Disappointing parents and other important adults.



Is there a safe level of alcohol use for teenagers?

The short answer is no, there is no safe level of alcohol use for teenagers, especially those under the age of 18. The *Australian Alcohol Guidelines* (see later) provide information on how many standard drinks a person can consume before their health is placed at high risk of harm. These limits are, however, meant for adults. The risk for young people is likely to be higher than for adults. Parents are the best judge of whether teenagers are ready to drink alcohol. It is, however, particularly risky for a person under the age of 16

to drink alcohol. It is also usually unlawful for under-18s to buy, be supplied with or drink alcohol on licensed premises.



At what age should parents begin talking about alcohol with children?

Discussions about alcohol should begin before children reach the age of 10-11 years. Children are never too young to start talking about the effects of alcohol and need to know what their parents think about drinking. They also need to know what their parents expect. Starting such discussions early also encourages open conversations in future and gives parents practice in discussing the issues before they become sensitive topics.

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Should I allow my teenager to drink?

For a range of reasons some parents allow their children to have small amounts of alcohol and others do not. If a parent does decide to allow access to alcohol, it is important to recognise the risks. It is important to discuss the difference between drinking alcohol in low risk ways (eg, accompanied by food and in small amounts) and drinking in harmful ways (eg, without adult supervision, getting drunk or driving).

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Should I talk about alcohol when I know my teenagers don't drink?

Many young people choose not to drink and parents should support and encourage them in this decision. It is also important to discuss the use of alcohol to prepare teenagers for the future when they may change their mind and choose to drink.

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What topics could parents talk about?

There are some topics that all parents should try to talk about with their children.

- Explain the risks of alcohol and focus on the immediate harmful effects of intoxication.
- Explain why alcohol can have a strong effect on young people.
- Identify and discuss ways to socialise and relax that don't involve alcohol.
- Discuss and practice ways to turn down offers of alcohol.
- Discuss how drinking too much alcohol can sometimes lead to behaviour teenagers may later regret. Ask them if they have seen examples like this.
- Discuss how friends could look after each other when they are out in a group.
- Discuss family rules about drinking alcohol. Most young people expect and appreciate some ground rules. Allow teenagers to take part in setting the rules as this encourages them to take more responsibility for their actions. Once you agree on rules enforce them, but talk about "withdrawing privileges" not "punishment".
- If teenagers are allowed to drink alcohol, set limits about how much, how often and the type of alcohol. Discuss what they can do to reduce harm - eating food, drinking slowly, using mobile phones to check in with parents, making arrangements to get home safely, and having a buddy system with a friend.

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- Discuss drink-spiking and ways to prevent this from happening. For example, opening/pouring your own drinks, never leaving your drink unattended, looking after your friends.



- Explain that when a person collapses after drinking alcohol that an overdose has occurred and this is a life-threatening situation requiring first aid.

Discuss first aid strategies. For example, the importance of placing an intoxicated person who has collapsed in the recovery position to maintain their airway, get help from an adult or call an ambulance.

- Discuss the laws in your State or Territory about alcohol possession and consumption. You may find the www.lawstuff.org.au website useful.
- Think about how to host a teenage party and what you can do to reduce risks. There are laws about the supply of alcohol to minors.

What if my teenager drinks alcohol?

When it comes to young people, the *Australian Alcohol Guidelines* recommend the following points should be remembered:

- young people should not drink to become intoxicated;
- where alcohol is available to them, young people should be under adult supervision at all times;
- young people should keep their drinking to a minimum and never drink above the level set for adults - preferably they should drink less;
- teenagers should not drink at all for several hours before undertaking risky activities such as climbing, swimming, or working with machinery or cars;
- a gradual, supervised introduction to alcohol is recommended; and
- alcohol should never be mixed with other drugs.

Are there any other tips for parents?

The relationship between parents and children is important for healthy teenage development. Teenagers need love, security and boundaries. Parents need to establish and enforce clear standards for teenage behaviour. They should also provide a warm and friendly family environment. It is important that parents set an example they are happy for their teenagers to copy, know what's going on in teenagers' lives and know their whereabouts. Effective communication between parents and teenagers is important and parents should take responsibility for this. Teenagers are less likely than younger children to ask for information so parents need to take the initiative and talk with teenagers about a wide range of topics.

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Set an example you are happy for teenagers to copy

Parents and other adults are powerful role models that children copy as they grow older. Alcohol consumption is very much a part of the Australian lifestyle and parents who drink can teach children how to use alcohol in low-risk ways by modelling responsible use such as providing alternatives to alcohol, avoiding driving after drinking and following the *Australian Alcohol Guidelines* (see next page).

Be part of teenagers' lives

Make time for your teenager, know what's going on in their life, and help them to feel like an important part of the family. Be interested in what they are doing, regularly take the time to do things (that they want to do) together and get to know their friends.

Know the whereabouts of your teenager

Ask where your teenagers are going, who they will be with and when they will be home but do so in a friendly way. While direct supervision is more appropriate for younger children, monitoring teenagers' whereabouts and staying in touch with their daily lives is important. Ask your teenager to contact you if plans change and be prepared to check if teenagers are where they say they are going to be. Teenagers who think their parents will check on their whereabouts are less likely to take part in risky behaviours than teenagers who think their parents will not check.



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Listen

Show your teenager you know how to listen. This will help them feel more comfortable about talking with you. Help them feel comfortable about telling you their problems. For example, ask them what they think about family decisions. This shows you value their opinions. Try to have discussions rather than give lectures. Asking for, listening to and talking about teenagers' opinions helps in this regard.

Be prepared to hear things you may not agree with

It is normal for teenagers to disagree with parents. If your teenager says things you do not agree with, acknowledge their right to have an opinion and explain why you disagree and what you would prefer them to think or do. Teenagers need to hear your views and know what you expect of them. This helps them to feel secure and provides them with

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information they may not have known. It also helps them to learn to accept responsibility for their opinions and decisions.

Be honest

Teenagers appreciate adults who are honest. It is important to be informed but don't pretend to know everything. Be prepared to say "I don't know but I will try and find out". Be honest and clear about where you stand so that your children will find it easier to be honest with you.

Pick your moment

Choose the right time to discuss alcohol by looking for natural opportunities as they arise. This might be watching TV or when talking about someone at school.

Stay calm

If you find out that your teenager has been drinking without your permission, stay calm and think about what you want to say. Think about when you will discuss the issue - discussing it at 2am when people are tired may not be the best time. Never try to talk to your teenager about the issue if they (or you) are under the influence of alcohol. Focus on what it is that the teenager did that was wrong (eg, drank alcohol without permission, broke an agreed curfew, failed to let you know of a change of plan, etc).

Keep talking

Once you've had a discussion, it's important to have another. Always be willing to discuss alcohol. Check what teenagers think you have said - sometimes what teenagers have "heard" was not the message the parent wanted to say. You could ask "So what do you think I mean?" or "What do you think my opinion would be?"

What is the *Australian Alcohol Guideline for Adults?*

To limit health risks:

Men

- No more than 4 standard drinks on an average day - and never more than 6 per day.
- No more than two standard drinks in the first hour and one per hour after that.

Women

- No more than 2 standard drinks on an average day - and never more than 4 per day.
- No more than one standard drink per hour.



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The Guidelines are different for men and for women because women are more susceptible to the harmful effects of alcohol.

Everyone should have one to two alcohol-free days every week

Regular alcohol-free days may help people remain in control of their drinking and reduce the likelihood of it becoming a habit.

The above *Australian Alcohol Guideline* assumes people:

- are of average or above average weight. People below average body size (60kg for men and 50kg for women) should drink less;
- are not about to undertake any activity involving risk or a degree of skill, including driving, flying, water sports, using complex or heavy machinery, or farm machinery etc;
- do not have a condition that is made worse by drinking, are depressed, or have a family history of alcohol-related problems;
- are not on medication;
- are not pregnant; and
- are 18 years of age or older.

Young people aged 18-24 years have the riskiest drinking patterns. Almost two-thirds of 18-24 year olds drink at a risky or high-risk level for harm in the short-term.

Although adolescents aged 14-17 years show roughly the same drinking risk profile as adults, they are at a much increased risk of harm due to their smaller physical size, and emotional and intellectual inexperience.

Further Information

The **Australian Government's Information Site for Alcohol** (www.alcohol.gov.au) contains information on alcohol-related health, including the *Australian Alcohol Guidelines* and links to other organisations throughout Australia that offer assistance and advice.

The **Australian Drug Information Network** (www.adin.com.au) provides a central point of access to alcohol and other drug resources. The **Alcohol and Drug Information Service** (ADIS) is a 24 hour, free, confidential telephone service that provides information, counselling, referral and advice to anyone concerned about their own or another's alcohol or other drug use.

State	Phone
Australian Capital Territory	(02) 6207 9977 or 1800 422 599
New South Wales	(02) 9361 8000 or 1800 422 599
Northern Territory	(08) 8922 8399 or 1800 629 683
Queensland	(07) 3236 2414 or 1800 177 833
South Australia	1300 131 340
Tasmania	(03) 6222 7511 or 1800 811 994
Victoria	(03) 9416 1818 or 1800 888 236
Western Australia	(08) 9442 5000 or 1800 198 024



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Standard Drink Guide



1.1 **1.6**
 285ml 425ml
 Full Strength Beer
 4.9% Alc./Vol



0.8 **1.2**
 285ml 425ml
 Mid Strength Beer
 3.5% Alc./Vol



0.6 **0.9**
 285ml 425ml
 Light Beer
 2.7% Alc./Vol



1.5
 375ml
 Full Strength Beer
 4.9% Alc./Vol



1
 375ml
 Mid Strength Beer
 3.5% Alc./Vol



0.8
 375ml
 Light Beer
 2.7% Alc./Vol



1.5
 375ml
 Pre-mix Spirits
 5% Alc./Vol



1.2
 300ml
 Pre-mix Spirits
 5% Alc./Vol



1
 30ml
 Spirits Nip
 40% Alc./Vol



22
 700ml
 Bottle of Spirits
 40% Alc./Vol



1
 30ml
 Spirit Shot
 40% Alc./Vol



1
 60ml/Sherry
 Glass
 20% Alc./Vol



1.5
 170ml
 Average Serve of
 Sparkling Wine/Champagne
 11.5% Alc.Vol



1.5
 150ml
 Average Serve of Wine
 12.5% Alc.Vol



7.5
 750ml
 Bottle of Wine
 12.5% Alc.Vol

Note. Labels on alcoholic drink containers state the number of Standard Drinks in the container.

Check the label to find out how many Standard Drinks are in the bottle or can.

The Standard Drinks shown are calculated to one decimal place.

To make counting your drinks easier, you can round the numbers up or down.

For example count 0.9 as 1.0 and 1.6 as 1.5.