

Alcohol and young people

Alcohol use is common among young people, with one-third of Australians between the age of 12 and 17 reporting recent drinking and about 4% regularly engaging in risky drinking behaviour.

Parents are the main supplier of alcohol to children under 18. While purchasing and drinking alcohol at licensed premises is illegal for children under 18, they are allowed to drink alcohol at home with their parents' permission.

Young people and binge drinking

When speaking about alcohol drinking in young people, the term 'binge drinking' comes up frequently, however there is no clear definition of this term.

Generally, binge drinking occurs when a person drinks heavily over a short period of time resulting in rapid and severe intoxication. Binge drinking is sometimes defined as 'drinking to get drunk' and high alcohol volume drinks are common in these settings.

Binge drinking is often associated with heavy drinking, however as little as four standard drinks can cause severe intoxication if consumed rapidly during a binge drinking occasion.



What is the law in Australia?

The laws around alcohol consumption for young people vary across the different states and territories, but broadly the 'drinking age' in Australia is 18 years. This means it is illegal to enter and drink alcohol at a licensed premises and illegal for anyone to sell or supply alcohol to a person under 18 unless they're the parent or legal guardian.

Drinking alcohol in a private home is allowed even before the age of 18 if a parent or legal guardian supplies the alcohol, however it is illegal to serve alcohol to children in a private home without their parents' permission.

The legal drinking age varies across different countries. The United States and Indonesia do not allow purchasing or drinking alcohol until the age of 21, whereas in some European countries, including Germany and Portugal, low alcohol beverages such as beer and wine can be legally bought and consumed from the age of 16.

How many young people drink alcohol in Australia?

According to the 2013 [National Drug Strategy Household Survey](#), close to one-third (28.8%) of 12- to 17-year-old Australians reported drinking alcohol in the previous 12 months.

The survey also found that among 12-17 year olds:

- **Nearly one in ten (8.7%) had more than 4 standard drinks** at least once a month, which is considered to be risky drinking. However, the proportion of 12- to 15-year-olds who reported any drinking in the past year halved from 35% in 2004 to 18% in 2013. Over the same period, drinking by 16- to 17-year-olds fell sharply from 81% to 59%.
- **3.7% had more than 10 standard drinks** at least once a month, putting them at very high risk of alcohol-related harm, and 5.5% did at least once a year. However, overall rates of heavy drinking have fallen, with teenagers in Australia drinking less alcohol now than they have at any time since these surveys began in the early 1980s.
- **Pre-mixed spirits were the preferred type of alcohol for 40% of respondents**

- One in six 12-15 year olds and one in four 16-17 year olds have been victims of alcohol-related incidents such as verbal or physical abuse, or being put in fear by an intoxicated person

What are the risks of drinking alcohol for young people?

In Australia, alcohol is the second leading cause of drug-related death and hospital admissions after tobacco.

Over one in every 10 deaths (13%) of Australians aged between 14 and 17 is alcohol-related, and each week around five Australians aged 15-24 years die and another 200 end up in hospital due to alcohol-related causes.

Alcohol is associated with a range of harms. Some harms are associated with drinking too much on one occasion (e.g. accidents, injuries, unsafe sex and alcohol poisoning), while other harms are associated with regular drinking (e.g. liver problems, cancer and alcohol dependence).

The major risks associated with alcohol use include immediate problems such as:

- Increased risk of experiencing an accident or injury, for example through road traffic accidents, falls, fires and drowning. This risk is especially high among young people
- Increased risk of sexually transmitted infections (STIs) or unintended pregnancy
- Increased chance of experiencing violence, for example getting into fights or being assaulted

Longer-term problems include:

- Alcohol dependence
- Brain damage and problems with brain development
- Malnutrition
- Cardiovascular (heart) problems
- Cancer – alcohol has been linked to a range of cancers, including mouth, oesophagus, liver and breast cancers
- Liver problems
- Increased risk of mental health problems such as anxiety and depression
- Alcohol use may also increase problems with diabetes and obesity

