

Alcohol & Cannabis: Lesson 1

Alcohol and the Law

- The legal drinking age in Australia is 18. It is generally illegal to sell or supply alcohol to a person under the age of 18 (minor).
- In most Australian states and territories, it is illegal for minors to possess or consume any alcohol in a public place, however, this rule does not apply in NSW, SA and QLD if they are under the supervision of a responsible adult.
- If the public place is an alcohol-free zone or an alcohol-prohibited area, it is still illegal for minors to possess or consume alcohol, even if they are under the supervision of a responsible adult.
- If a minor is in possession of alcohol in a public place and is not under the supervision of a responsible adult, the police can seize the alcohol.

NHMRC 2020 Guidelines

Adults

The Australian Alcohol Guidelines recommend healthy adults:

1. Drink no more than 10 standard drinks week to minimise the risk of alcohol-related harm over a lifetime
2. Drink no more than 4 standard drinks on a single occasion to minimise the risk of injury on a single occasion of drinking

Young people

For young people (up to 18 years) the Australian Alcohol Guidelines recommend that the safest option is to not drink at all. If drinking does occur, it should be at a low-risk level and in a safe environment, supervised by adults.

How do you know how many standard drinks are contained in an alcoholic beverage?

- The labels on alcoholic drink bottles and cans state the number of standard drinks they contain. This is required under Australian labelling laws.
- The standard drinks chart available in the module resources provides a summary of the approximate number of standard drinks in different alcoholic beverage categories.
- For example:

A can of full strength beer contains 1.4 standard drinks

A can (375ml) of full strength premixed spirits contains 1.5 standard drinks

A bottle (330ml) of full strength premixed spirits contains 1.2 standard drinks

How much do teenagers drink?

Many adolescents falsely believe that the majority of their peers are drinking alcohol in excessive quantities. This can result in these adolescents consuming excessive alcohol themselves, in an attempt to conform with their peers. The truth is that very few adolescents drink alcohol and it's important adolescents are aware of the true statistics. Research has shown that if young people have accurate information regarding their peer's consumption of alcohol, they themselves are less likely to consume alcohol.

The 2016 National Drug Strategy Household Survey found that although many 12-15 year olds have tried alcohol, only 11% have ever had a full serve of alcohol. The results of this survey revealed that very few 12-15 year olds drink to excess, with only 0.7% reporting drinking above a level that increases the risk of alcohol-related injury on a single occasion.

Reassuringly, the 2019 National Drug Strategy Household Survey, which looked at older adolescents (14-17 years), found that there has been a considerable increase in the number of young people abstaining from drinking alcohol in the recent years. Among 14-17 year olds, 73% abstained from alcohol, which is more than a 20% increase compared to 2010 figures.

What sort of acute harms do young people experience from alcohol?

Alcohol-related incidents:

The National Drug Strategy Household Survey (2019) found that 12.1% of young people (1 in 8), aged 14-17 years, had experienced an alcohol-related incident during the previous year. Approximately 1 in 12 of those incidents involved verbal abuse and 1 in 37 involved physical abuse. When looking at all Australians aged over 14 years, these figures increase substantially with approximately 1 in 5 reporting they had been a victim of alcohol-related verbal abuse and 1 in 20 reporting they had been physically abused by someone under the influence of alcohol.

Alcohol and driving:

The Australian Medical Association reported that alcohol is a greater factor than speed, fatigue, weather, or road conditions in fatal road crashes. A report produced by the World Health Organisation found that in Australia, 17% of fatal road crashes involved alcohol. In Australia, the maximum blood alcohol concentration (BAC) permitted for a full drivers licence holder is 0.05 while driving, whilst **learner and provisional drivers are required to have a BAC of zero.**

Alcohol-related hospitalisation & fatalities

The National Alcohol Indicators Project found that an estimated 5,785 Australians aged 15 years and over died from alcohol-attributable disease and injury in a single year. The last national record of alcohol-attributable hospital admissions found 144,000 in a single year, averaging to about 400 per day. **Alcohol-related emergency department presentations are highest among teenagers (15-19 year olds), compared with other age cohorts.**

In an average week, 5 Australians aged 15-24 years die due to alcohol-related causes. Alcohol contributes to the three leading causes of adolescent death: unintentional injuries, homicide and suicide.

Short-term risks associated with heavy alcohol consumption

Physical Health

- Nausea

- Vomiting
- Coma
- Death
- Poor coordination
- Hangover
- Slurred speech
- Loss of consciousness
- Disorientation
- Poor balance
- Slowed reflexes
- Abnormal heart rhythm
- Dieting or disordered eating can lead to a disproportionate loss of body fluid. This means that the effects of alcohol are exacerbated, due to the increased concentration of alcohol resulting from reduced body fluid.
- Drink driving is a factor in 1 in 6 driving accidents where someone loses their life, and one-third of all drivers involved in fatal accidents are aged between 17-24.

Mental Health

- Verbal aggression
- Poor short-term memory retrieval
- Poor long-term memory retrieval
- Decreased ability to pay attention to more than one thing at a time
- Decreased ability to form memories – leading to experience of “blackouts” in memory
- Physical aggression
- Decreased inhibitions
- Poor decision-making
- Low mood
- Poorer concentration

Social interactions

- Embarrassing social situations e.g., vomiting in public, decreased inhibitions
- Fights (verbal and physical) from having a reduced capacity to think clearly and resolve potential conflict
- A person who drinks too much alcohol is more likely to be verbally abused and be the victim of crime

- Unwanted sexual situations and unprotected sex, which can lead to pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections (STIs)

Younger people are at increased risk:

- Younger people are more likely than older people to participate in physical activities which require good motor skills e.g., swimming and rock climbing. If these skill-dependent activities are combined with alcohol, the results can be tragic, as alcohol inhibits motor skills.

Long-term risks associated with heavy alcohol consumption

Physical Health

- Increased risk of stroke
- Cancers of the head, neck and digestive tract
- Liver related illness and death
- Increased blood pressure and risk of heart disease

Mental Health

- Alcohol abuse and dependence
- Impairment in memory, reasoning and thinking
- Increased risk of mood and anxiety disorders

Occupational / Work:

- Poor school or work performance
- Loss of job or future career opportunity
- Absenteeism

Family & Social:

- Relationship breakdown
- Exacerbated potential for domestic violence

Economic costs to society:

- Health and social consequences resulting from excessive alcohol consumption have a huge economic cost (e.g., lost work productivity, health care, accidents, insurance claims, alcohol treatment)

Useful Resources

This reference list is provided as a good source of information for parents who may be interested in reading further.

For information about Australian alcohol laws:

Australian Government Department of Health (2020). Alcohol laws in Australia.

<https://www.health.gov.au/health-topics/alcohol/about-alcohol/alcohol-laws-in-australia>

For general information about alcohol and young people:

Alcohol and Drug Foundation (2018). Alcohol and young people.

https://cdn.adf.org.au/media/documents/ADF_AOD_YoungPeople.pdf

National Drug & Research Centre. Alcohol and young people.

https://ndarc.med.unsw.edu.au/sites/default/files/ndarc/resources/NDA073%20Fact%20Sheet%20Alcohol%20and%20Young%20People_0.pdf

For information and statistics on alcohol and drug use in Australia:

The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2020). 2019 National Drug Strategy Household Survey report.

<https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/illicit-use-of-drugs/national-drug-strategy-household-survey-2019/contents/table-of-contents>

Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2017). National Drug Strategy Household Survey 2016: detailed findings.

<https://www.aihw.gov.au/getmedia/15db8c15-7062-4cde-bfa4-3c2079f30af3/21028.pdf.aspx?inline=true>

For information and statistics on alcohol use among Australian students:

Australian Government Department of Health (2018). Australian secondary school student' use of tobacco, alcohol and other drugs in 2017.

<https://www.health.gov.au/resources/publications/secondary-school-students-use-of-tobacco-alcohol-and-other-drugs-in-2017>

For information about the Australian drinking guidelines:

National Health and Medical Research Council (2020). Australian guidelines to reduce health risks from drinking alcohol. Commonwealth of Australia.

<https://www.nhmrc.gov.au/about-us/publications/australian-guidelines-reduce-health-risks-drinking-alcohol>

For information about alcohol-related harms and deaths:

National Alcohol Indicators Project Bulletin No. 14 Trends in estimated alcohol-related emergency department presentations in Australia 2005-06 to 2011-12. National Drug Research Institute, Curtin University, WA.

<https://ndri.curtin.edu.au/NDRI/media/documents/naip/naip014.pdf>

National Alcohol Indicators Project Bulletin No. 16 Estimated alcohol-attributable deaths and hospitalisations in Australia, 2004 to 2015. National Drug Research Institute, Curtin University, WA.

<https://ndri.curtin.edu.au/ndri/media/documents/naip/naip016.pdf>

For information about drink driving facts, statistics and law impacts:

World Health Organization (2018). Global Status Report on Road Safety 2018.

<https://apps.who.int/iris/rest/bitstreams/1164010/retrieve>

The Defenders. Drink Driving Facts and Statistics.

<https://www.thedefenders.com.au/drink-driving-statistics/>

