

If you decide to buy alcohol for your teenager, they still need to know that you have expectations about how much they'll drink, and how they'll stay safe.

Here are some tips for talking about staying safe and in control when drinking.

- Talk about how bigger amounts of alcohol have bigger impacts on the body. The medical risks related to small amounts are far lower than those associated with drinking large amounts, bingeing or drinking to get drunk.
- Encourage your teenager to use sensible tactics to keep track of how much they've drunk, and manage their drinking. Show them how to calculate the number of standard drinks they've had, and suggest that they alternate alcohol with water or other non-alcoholic drinks and eat before and during drinking.
- Suggest that it's a good idea for someone in their group to stay sober, so that they can monitor how much people are drinking, encourage and help them to stay safe, and intervene if trouble arises.
- Ask your teenager for a firm plan about how they'll get home. Let them know that public transport, taxis, designated drivers and calling home for a lift are all fine - but make it clear that driving drunk, or riding with a drunk driver is entirely out of bounds.
- Encourage your teenager to talk to their friends about keeping each other safe.
- Find out who your teenager is going out with, exactly where they're going, and when they'll be home. Ask them to let you know straight away if their plans change.
- Organise agreed times for them or you to 'check in'.

When to say when

It's important to know your limits before you reach them, but sometimes it may be hard to realise when you've had too much. Often you only realise when it's too late. Here is some advice to help you drink in moderation.

A good time to stop drinking is when:

- You're talkative and you feel relaxed
- Your self-confidence increases
- You've had 2 - 4 drinks and are close to exceeding the recommended guidelines

You may have left it too late if:

- You feel less inhibited and your attention span is shorter
- You start dehydrating (one of the causes of a hangover)
- Your reaction time is slower
- You're easily confused
- You become emotional
- Your libido (sex drive) decreases
- You become aggressive

Some tips on how to monitor your drinking

Make a plan

Before you start drinking, set yourself a limit on how much you're going to drink. Try to avoid buying rounds as this may encourage you to go beyond your limit.

Set yourself a budget

Only take a fixed amount of money to spend on alcohol and leave your cards at home so that you're not tempted to take out more money once you have spent your budget.

Count your drinks

Making the effort to record how many drinks you have may help you reduce or slow down your drinking. You can use a handwritten note that you keep in your wallet or record your drinks on your Smartphone or PDA. Make sure you avoid 'top ups' as this will make it difficult to count.

The benefits of drinking less

The most immediate effects of cutting down include:

- feeling better in the mornings
- being less tired during the day
- your skin may start to look better
- you'll start to feel fitter
- you may stop gaining weight.

Other health considerations include:

Heart

Long-term heavy drinking can lead to your heart becoming enlarged. This is a serious condition that can't be completely reversed, but stopping drinking is an important part of preventing it getting worse.

Immune system

Regular drinking can affect your immune system. Heavy drinkers tend to catch more infectious diseases.

Sleep

Drinking can affect your sleep. Although it can help some people fall asleep quickly, it can disrupt your sleep patterns and stop you from sleeping deeply. So cutting down on alcohol should help you feel more rested when you wake up.

Behaviour

Drinking can affect your judgment and behaviour. You may behave irrationally or aggressively when you're drunk. Memory loss can be a problem during drinking and in the long-term for regular heavy drinkers, drinking less can help prevent this.

Women and alcohol

Doctors suggest that women should drink less than men. This is because women's body tissue absorbs a higher concentration of alcohol than men's. As a consequence, women often

- get drunk more quickly than men
- recover from drinking more slowly than men
- go over the legal driving limit more quickly than men.

You can develop a tolerance for Alcohol if you regularly consume it

Anyone can develop a tolerance to alcohol. Tolerance means that you must drink more to feel the same effects you used to have with lower amounts. If this continues, you can develop a dependence on alcohol, which means that it takes up much of your thoughts, emotions and activities. Not all people who drink are dependent.

Dependent people find it very difficult to stop or reduce drinking. This is because of withdrawal symptoms, which can include:

- anxiety
- sweating
- shaking
- vomiting
- fits
- hallucinations (seeing or hearing things).

Immediate effects

The most obvious and immediate effects of alcohol are on the brain, beginning with feelings of relaxation, wellbeing and loss of inhibitions. However, as the intake of alcohol increases, these effects are counter-balanced by less pleasant effects, such as drowsiness, loss of balance, nausea and vomiting.

Alcohol slows down the messages sent between the brain and the rest of the body. This can make you:

- relax, feel good
- do or say things you normally wouldn't
- feel dizzy, have bad balance
- have trouble controlling how you move (bad coordination)
- react slowly
- get angry
- vomit
- have blurred vision (not see clearly)

- slur your words (not speak clearly).

Drinking a lot in a short time can cause:

- a hangover
- headaches
- nausea or vomiting
- shakiness
- passing out
- stop breathing (rare).

Long-term effects

Regularly drinking above recommended daily limits risks damaging your health. There's no guaranteed safe level of drinking, but if you drink below recommended daily limits, the risks of harming your health are low.

And it's certainly not only people who get drunk or binge-drink who are at risk. Most people who regularly drink more than the **NHMRC guidelines** recommend don't see any harmful effects at first.

Alcohol's hidden harmful effects usually only emerge after a number of years. By then, serious health problems can have developed.

Liver problems, reduced fertility, high blood pressure, increased risk of various cancers and heart attack are some of the numerous harmful effects of regularly drinking above recommended levels.

The effects of alcohol on your health will depend on how much you drink. The more you drink, the greater the health risks.

Long-term effects

Drinking a lot of alcohol regularly over time is likely to cause physical, emotional or social problems. Damage to some body organs can be permanent. Problems can include:

- poor diet
- stomach problems
- frequent infections
- skin problems

- liver and brain damage
- damage to reproductive organs
- memory loss/confusion
- heart and blood disorders
- depression
- relationship problems
- work problems
- money or legal troubles.

Age is an important determinant of health risks related to alcohol. Harm from alcohol-related accident or injury is experienced disproportionately by younger people; for example, over half of all serious alcohol-related road injuries occur among 15–24-year-olds. Harm from alcohol-related disease is more evident among older people.

Cumulative effects

Alcohol consumption has been associated with a range of diseases that may cause death and adverse effects that reduce quality of life.

- **Cardiovascular disease** – The effect of alcohol on the cardiovascular system is complex. Alcohol can raise blood pressure and increase the risk of arrhythmias (fast, slow, or irregular heartbeat), shortness of breath, some types of cardiac failure, hemorrhagic stroke and other circulatory problems.
- **Cancers** – Alcohol is increasingly associated with a raised risk of cancer: a recent report by the International Agency for Cancer Research (Baan et al 2007) found convincing evidence that alcohol is carcinogenic to humans, being causally related to cancers of the oral cavity, pharynx, larynx, oesophagus, liver, colorectum and female breast.
- **Nutrition-related conditions** – alcohol consumption is linked to malnutrition, Wernicke-Korsakoff syndrome, folate deficiency, Vitamin A depletion and pellagra (NHMRC 2001).
- **Overweight and obesity** – Alcohol adds kilojoules to the normal diet and may also increase your appetite, which often results in late night, fast food binges. The amount of alcohol consumed, how often you drink and genetic factors all influence an individual's tendency to gain weight (Suter 2005).
- **Liver diseases** – alcohol consumption is the most common cause of cirrhosis of the liver, and drinking alcohol over many years can cause cirrhosis in the absence of other causes (NHMRC 2001). The presence of conditions such as

hepatitis B or C increases the effects of alcohol in contributing to development and course of cirrhosis.

- **Mental health conditions** – there is growing evidence that alcohol increases the risk of highly prevalent mental health conditions such as depression and anxiety in some people, and may affect the efficacy of anti-depressant medication (Loxley et al 2004):
- Alcohol dependence and major depression can be related. Alcohol dependence increases the risk of having major depression and the presence of major depression can increase the risk of developing a dependence on alcohol.
- Around 40 per cent of people seeking treatment for alcohol dependence will also have a major depressive disorder in their lifetime.
- Major depression combined with alcohol dependence can increase the risk of violence and suicidal behaviour.

Drinking and...**The law**

In the state of NSW it is:

- Illegal to sell alcohol to, or get alcohol for, anyone under 18
- Illegal to sell alcohol to someone who is already drunk
- An offence to drink or carry alcohol in an alcohol-free zone.

Driving

Alcohol is involved in around one-third of all road deaths and there are laws to limit the amount a person can drink before driving.

In Australia, the legal limit for drinking and driving for most people is .05 BAC.

In NSW the limit is zero for:

- L- and P- plate drivers
- drivers under 25, for their first three years of driving (if starting with P-plates)
- drivers of heavy vehicles (like trucks), public passenger vehicles (like buses) and dangerous goods vehicles (like trucks carrying chemicals).

What are the Australian Alcohol Guidelines?

The National Health and Medical Research Council published the 'Australian guidelines to reduce health risks from drinking alcohol' in 2009.

The NHMRC guidelines are:

Guideline 1

Reducing the risk of alcohol-related harm over a lifetime

For healthy men and women, drinking no more than two standard drinks on any day reduces the lifetime risk of harm from alcohol-related disease or injury.

Guideline 2

Reducing the risk of injury on a single occasion of drinking

For healthy men and women, drinking no more than four standard drinks on a single occasion reduces the risk of alcohol-related injury arising from that occasion.

Guideline 3

Children and young people under 18 years of age

For children and young people under 18 years of age, not drinking alcohol is the safest option.

Parents and carers should be advised that children under 15 years of age are at the greatest risk of harm from drinking and that for this age group, not drinking alcohol is especially important.

For young people aged 15–17 years, the safest option is to delay the initiation of drinking for as long as possible.

Guideline 4

Pregnancy and breastfeeding

Maternal alcohol consumption can harm the developing fetus or breastfeeding baby.

For women who are pregnant or planning a pregnancy, not drinking is the safest option.

For women who are breastfeeding, not drinking is the safest option.