

ALCOHOL AND YOUNG PEOPLE

Aged 12 to 17 Years

Key Points:

In 1993, 34% of male and 27% of female students between the ages of 12 and 17 years in Western Australia drank at least once during the week.

A 1994 survey found that more than 42% of Perth adolescents aged 15 to 17 years who were surveyed, believed that they should accept alcoholic drinks offered to them by friends. Young people drink for much the same reason as adults. Their reasons for drinking include having fun, relaxation and forgetting problems.

Alcohol is responsible for the majority of drug-related deaths in people aged 15 to 34 years (62%).

Data contained in this document are from a number of sources, with the majority of information focusing on school students. However, some data does pertain (where indicated) to young people in general.

ALCOHOL CONSUMPTION

Approximately 90% of students between the ages of 12 and 17 years have had some experience with alcohol. Seventy-one per cent of students of this age have consumed alcohol in the last 12 months, 44% in the past four weeks and 30% in the last week.¹

Approximately 34% of male and 27% of female students between the ages of 12 and 17 years in Western Australia drink at least once during the week.¹

Use of alcohol increases with age.² By 15 years of age, male and female student drinkers (i.e. students who have had an alcoholic drink in the last week) consume on average five drinks per week. At age 17 years, male student drinkers consume, on average, nine alcoholic drinks per week, while female student drinkers consume on average seven drinks per week.¹

In a 1996 study, the participants identified half a bottle of spirits as a common amount of alcohol that young people would consume in one session. Six cans of beer (full strength, 5% alcohol) was also mentioned as a reasonable amount to drink.³

OBTAINING ALCOHOL

Research suggests that students have easy access to alcohol and that it is readily available at most social occasions from Year 9 (i.e. 14 years of age) onwards.⁵ Pooling funds to buy alcohol, or acquiring it from other sources where they do not have to pay, is common practice among 14 to 16 year olds.⁵

The most common source from which student drinkers obtain alcohol is their parents, in fact one in three acquire alcohol this way. The next most frequently nominated source of alcohol (mentioned by approximately one in five) is friends. By age 16 some student drinkers are able to purchase alcohol from sales outlets such as drive-in bottle shops and liquor stores.¹

One Victorian study showed the proportion of students who had ever bought or paid for an alcoholic drink to increase steadily from 12% of drinkers in Year 7 to 71% in Year 11. Forty-six percent of Year 11 drinkers usually buy their own alcohol, and of these, 30% usually buy it from a hotel, 33% from a walk-in-bottle shop and 24% from a drive-in-bottle shop.⁶

PATTERN OF DRINKING BEHAVIOUR

While many young people begin drinking by the age of 12 or 13, research indicates that the average age that many first 'binge' (i.e. drink five or more drinks at any one drinking session) is between 14 and 15 years of age.⁶

Binge drinking increases markedly with each school year level. In Year 7 (12 years of age), 3% of the students have engaged in this kind of drinking while by Year 11 (16 years of age), the proportion has increased to 37%.⁶

Similarly, planning to binge drink increases with age. While only 39% of Year 7 students who binge drink plan to do so, 67% of those in Year 11 plan to binge drink. Among Year 11 students, males are much more likely to plan to drink heavily than females.⁶

Recent qualitative research with young people aged 14 to 19 years, highlighted an expectation held by many young drinkers to get drunk in most drinking situations.⁵

The same research showed many young people find being drunk acceptable, and referred to drunkenness in terms of positive associations. Drunkenness was often attributed a 'hero' status which encouraged excessive alcohol consumption.⁵

In one Victorian study students said they stop drinking: 'When I run out of money'; 'When the bottle is empty'; 'When I vomit'; or 'When I fall over'.⁴

The key deterrents to getting drunk identified by participants included: fighting; offending friends; making fools of themselves; and unwanted sexual encounters (particularly for female participants).⁷

TYPES OF ALCOHOL CONSUMED

The most popular types of drinks consumed by male student drinkers are beer (46%) and spirits (41%). Female student drinkers tend to prefer spirits (48%), followed by beer (19%) and wine (18%).¹

PLACE OF CONSUMPTION

The most common place for drinking alcohol for both males and female student drinkers is at home (40%), followed by a party (28%) and then a friend's home (12%).^{1,4,6} As students become older, parties become more popular drinking venues.¹

PEER AND PARENTAL INFLUENCE

Students who drink alcohol regularly are more likely to have someone close to them who also drinks alcohol. Having a friend or sibling who drinks is a major influence although parental drinking is also a factor.⁶

A survey in 1994 found that more than 42% of young people aged 15 to 17 years believed that they should accept alcoholic drinks offered to them by friends.⁸

Qualitative research with young people aged 14 to 19 years has demonstrated that negative messages regarding alcohol from parents tends to encourage rebellion. Negative messages include: allowing their children to do what they want, appearing not to care what they do, and not consenting at all to their child's consumption of alcohol. Respondents who receive negative messages are more likely to binge drink than those who receive positive messages.⁹

WHAT STUDENTS THINK ABOUT ALCOHOL

Many students regard drinking as a legitimate pastime and as an essential aspect of leisure and entertainment.¹⁰

Young people drink for much the same reason as adults. Their reasons for drinking include having fun, relaxation, and forgetting problems.^{4,10}

Many students claim alcohol gives them confidence, removes personal responsibility for decisions and lessens inhibitions. For some students, getting drunk is proof of having a good time.⁴

Two out of five (40%) of the young people aged 15 to 17 years who were surveyed, believe that silly or embarrassing behaviour is excusable if the person is drunk.⁹ However, although it was considered acceptable to get drunk, it was not considered acceptable to be drunk and out of control: "It's fine to get drunk provided you don't get too drunk and lose control...start vomiting, can't walk..." (15 year old female).⁷

The majority of students (even non-drinkers) believe that they will drink more in the future than they do now.⁴

Students who drink are more concerned by short-term or immediate consequences of drinking than long-term health effects. Perceived problems are: conflict with adults, personal injury or accident, aggression and violence, and sexual vulnerability for females.⁴

STUDENTS KNOWLEDGE ABOUT ALCOHOL

A vast majority of young people are aware of the health risks associated with drinking.⁸ Many students however, lack knowledge of the properties and effects of alcohol and how it is metabolised.^{4,7}

Friends are a major source of information about alcohol for students.⁴

Students do not know how to monitor their intake of alcohol to prevent intoxication.¹⁰

One study indicated that 42% of all students had received more than one lesson on drinking at school in 1992.¹

MORBIDITY AND MORTALITY

Alcohol is responsible for the majority of drug-related deaths in people aged 15 to 34 years (62%).¹¹

Alcohol contributes significantly to hospital admissions, most commonly from alcohol dependence, strokes, fall injuries, road crashes and other accidents.¹¹

Young people aged 15 to 19 are highly represented in alcohol-caused harm statistics. Excluding those aged 75 years and above, 15 to 19 year olds have the third highest (after 20 to 24 and 25 to 29 year olds) hospitalisation rate for all alcohol-caused injuries. Road injuries, falls and assaults are the most common alcohol-caused injuries resulting in hospitalisation in this age group.¹²

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RELATED PUBLICATIONS

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- ▼ Economic costs of alcohol to the community
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