



ALCOHOL, DRUGS AND YOUNG PEOPLE

The extent and impact of alcohol and drug use by Australian young people*

While studies of alcohol, tobacco and drug use among young Australians indicate that usage rates have been dropping over the past two decades, there is evidence of continued use among a significant proportion of young people. Alcohol and drug use is a major risk factor for preventable illness and fatality in Australia and adolescence is a period of particular vulnerability. There is evidence that for young people, alcohol and drug use can affect later neuro-behavioural development including changes in attention, verbal learning, visuospatial processing, and memory. Young people are also more likely to be victims of alcohol-related violent incidents.

What drugs are associated with harm?

The National Drug Strategy¹ identified several drug types that cause the most harm in Australia including alcohol and tobacco, cannabis, methamphetamines and other stimulants, opioids and the non-medical use of prescription drugs.

What is the extent of their impact?

The extent of harm from drug and alcohol use is commonly assessed by examining its impact on 'burden of disease'. According to the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 'burden of disease' measures the impact of living with illness and injury and dying prematurely.² Data from the 2015 Australian Burden of Disease Study indicated:

- tobacco, alcohol and illicit drug use collectively accounted for 16.5 per cent of the total burden of disease

- alcohol use contributed to 4.5 per cent of the total burden of disease
- illicit drug use contributed to 2.7 per cent of the total burden of disease.²

Estimates from the 2019 National Drug Strategy Household Survey³ suggest that alcohol and illicit drug use are responsible for a proportionally greater burden of disease among young people.

Researchers found:

- alcohol and illicit drug use were the leading causes of the total burden of disease in young males and the second and third leading causes (respectively) of disease burden in young females
- young males experienced nearly twice the burden from alcohol use and nearly twice the burden from illicit drug use, compared with young females.

* Studies of drug and alcohol use vary in terms of their definition of young people. The research referred to within this summary includes cohorts of young people between the ages of 10 and 29 years.

How does alcohol and other drug use impact young people?

Adolescence is one of the most dynamic stages of human growth and development, second only to infancy.⁴

Because of the high rates of initiation and increased use of alcohol and other drugs among adolescents, there is substantial interest in investigating the consequences of consumption on later neurobehavioural development.

Alcohol use in adolescence has been associated with changes in attention, verbal learning, visuospatial processing, and memory, as well as changed grey and white matter volumes and impaired white matter integrity. Reduced cognitive flexibility, behavioural inefficiencies, and increases in anxiety, disinhibition, impulsivity, and risk-taking have all been found in investigations of teenage alcohol consumption in rodent models of adolescence.⁵

Substance use during adolescence has been associated with alterations in brain structure, function, and neurocognition. For example, studies have shown that marijuana use during adolescence can result in decreases in cognitive functioning, particularly learning and sequencing scores.⁶

Younger people are also more likely to be victims of alcohol-related incidents. In 2019, one in three people aged 18–24 (34%) had been the victim of any alcohol-related incidents (including physical and verbal abuse and being put in fear) in the previous 12 months.³

The Australian Secondary Students' Alcohol and Drug Survey showed that in 2017, both male and female students who reported a mental health condition were more likely to report higher use of tobacco, alcohol and illicit substances than those that had not been diagnosed with a mental health condition.⁷

Finally, longitudinal evidence suggests that the early onset of regular drinking is associated with alcohol problems during adulthood.⁸

How many young people use alcohol and other drugs?

The 2019 National Drug Strategy Household Survey reported that between 2007 and 2019, the proportion of youth aged 14–17 who abstained from alcohol increased from 39 per cent to 73 per cent. Moreover, the average age of alcohol initiation has steadily risen from 14.7 in 2001 to 16.2 years in 2019.³

Of those surveyed in the Australian Secondary Students' Alcohol and Drug Survey, 34 per cent reported never having consumed alcohol; with alcohol use being more common among older students—76 per cent of 17-year-olds had consumed alcohol in the past year, compared to 17 per cent of those aged 12 years.⁷

Approximately one in three students surveyed reported risky drinking on at least one occasion in their lifetime. While the proportion of young people aged 18–24 who exceeded the lifetime risk guidelines has increased slightly between 2016 and 2019 (18.6% in 2016 to 18.8% in 2019), this proportion has declined substantially since 2007 (30%).³

Youth smoking rates have continued to steadily decline, with just 2.2 per cent of surveyed secondary school students aged 12–14 identifying as current smokers in 2017, compared to 9 per cent in 2002.⁹ The average age of tobacco initiation has steadily risen from 14.3 in 2001 to 16.6 years in 2019.³

According to the 2016 National Drug Strategy Household Survey, by the age of 19, almost 20 per cent of Australians had tried an illicit drug. The survey also identified that cannabis was the most commonly used illicit substance among secondary school students.¹⁰

There is however evidence that there has been a reduction in the proportion of young adults aged 18–24 who have recently used any illicit drug (from 37% in 2001 to 31% in 2019).³

Conclusion

Research evidence suggests that the rates of use of alcohol, tobacco and other drugs are dropping among young Australians and in the case of alcohol and tobacco, that the average age of initiation is increasing. While these trends are encouraging, there continues to be a significant number of young people using these substances.

Given the growing body of evidence indicating associations between alcohol and other drug use and cognitive changes, victimisation and mental health problems, there would be value in exploring and implementing evidence-based programs and supports to prevent some of these harmful consequences and improve outcomes for young people.

References

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Seeking your feedback

This research summary addresses one of the topics within the Queensland Family and Child Commission's research agenda. The research agenda identifies opportunities to expand the evidence base and to improve services and outcomes around matters that are relevant to Queensland children, young people and families. We welcome your feedback on this research summary which can be provided via the QR code.

