

# ALCOHOL AND YOUNG PEOPLE

## AUSTRALIAN ALCOHOL GUIDELINES – FACT SHEET

### ***Guidelines for young people***

Young people are urged not to drink beyond the levels set in the guidelines developed for low risk drinking by adults. If they choose not to drink, they should be supported in this decision. In settings where alcohol is available to them they should be supervised by adults at all times. Most importantly, young people should not drink to become intoxicated.

### ***Body size and type***

- ❑ Children and adolescents (up to 18 years) have a greater vulnerability to alcohol than adults do because they are usually physically smaller, meaning that their bodies process alcohol considerably more slowly and less efficiently than adult bodies do.
- ❑ Young people lack drinking experience and its effects, and so have no basis for assessing or regulating their drinking.
- ❑ Young women process alcohol much less efficiently than males.

### ***Drinking patterns***

Amongst those aged 14-17 years, who were surveyed in 2001, 64% of males and 69% of females were current drinkers. Males (21%) and females (25%) drank at least once a month, at levels that placed them at risk of short-term harm.

Binge drinking—commonly including drinking to intoxication—is most common among 14-25 year olds.

### ***Schoolies week***

Just finishing high school ('schoolies week') is often linked to episodes of very high levels of binge drinking, and/or deliberately drinking to intoxication. Over 70% of male and 60% of female school leavers report getting drunk on most or all days or nights of their 'schoolies week'.

### ***Immediate harm***

Death by alcohol overdose is of particular concern among young drinkers. The three leading causes of death among adolescents – unintentional injuries, homicide, and suicide, are all associated with alcohol. Between 1990 and 1997, over half of all serious alcohol-related road injuries (52%) in Australia were sustained by people aged 15-24 years.

Loss of inhibitions and decision-making skills place young people at particular risk of violence, accidents and sexual coercion.

Alcohol is an added risk factor for injury and death during activities such as swimming, diving, surfing, boating, water skiing and fishing, and accounts for 32% of drownings in males aged 15-29.

Recent studies have shown that high-risk drinking and harmful outcomes are more common for single males under the age of 25 who have not eaten and who have been drinking at hotels or nightclubs.

### ***Alcohol and drugs***

Alcohol dampens activity in the brain and it can be particularly risky—and even fatal—if it is taken with other drugs that have the same effect, such as heroin and benzodiazepines. Drug overdoses, suicide and self-harm can result. The combination of alcohol and drugs (including cannabis) can also make it difficult to drive or carry out other activities, with the potential to harm others as well as the drinker. Misuse of alcohol is often accompanied by misuse of other drugs.

**For more information contact John Noble, Media Unit on 0413 890 241.**