



A teenager's brain and alcohol

Australian teenagers live in a world where alcohol is regularly promoted and consumed. So parents often ask 'What is a safe level of alcohol consumption for my teenager?'

It used to be thought that the teenage brain was the same as an adult brain, and that it had already reached full development. Now we know that from the age of 12 or 13 years through to the late 20's, the brain is still in a state of intense development and hardwiring, growing and forming all the critical parts it needs for learning, memory and planning. Alcohol has the potential to disrupt this crucial window of development and can lead to learning difficulties, memory impairment and emotional problems like depression and anxiety (Hayes et al., 2004).¹

The *Australian Guidelines to Reduce Health Risks from Drinking Alcohol* (NHMRA, 2009)² give clear advice on how to minimise the harmful health consequences of alcohol consumption for adults and young people.



No alcohol is the safest choice for those under 18 years of age



Guideline 1

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

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 3A

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.

Guideline 3B

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



Guideline 4A

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

Guideline 4B

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



These two video clips give further information on alcohol and young people

- *Under Construction* on the Turning Point website <http://www.turningpoint.org.au/Education/Schools-and-Young-People/Under-Construction.aspx>.
- *Teach teens to play it safe with alcohol* on the Alcohol Think Again website <http://alcoholthinkagain.com.au/>

These guidelines are based on the best evidence available about alcohol related harm and young people. Drinking alcohol from an early age can contribute to harms which range from antisocial behaviour and injury through to violence and even suicide.

¹ Hayes, L., Smart, D., Toumbourou, J.W., and Sanson, A. (2004). Parenting influence on adolescent alcohol use, report prepared by the Australian Institute of Family Studies for the Australian Government Department of Health and Aging, Canberra.

² National Health and Medical Research Council (2009). Australian guidelines to reduce health risks from drinking alcohol. Commonwealth of Australia. Retrieved from http://www.nhmrc.gov.au/_files_nhmrc/publications/attachments/ds10-alcohol.pdf