

ALCOHOL

We live in a world where alcohol is regularly promoted and consumed. It is indeed, socially accepted and part of the Australian culture. And choosing to drink or not to drink as an adolescent is complex, especially when role models and significant adults may use alcohol for a variety of reasons. We get that.

WHAT'S ALCOHOL?

Firstly, let's have a think about what alcohol is – a colourless volatile flammable liquid which is produced by the natural fermentation of sugars used, as we know, in wine, beer, spirits, and other drinks. It also can be used in industry as a solvent and as fuel so as you can imagine it can have some toxic effects on the body when used in large quantities.

Alcohol is a psychoactive drug. This means when someone drinks alcohol it has a physiological effect. It acts on the central nervous system, or CNS, where it alters brain function. This can result in temporary changes in perception, mood, consciousness and behaviour.

Alcohol is also classified as a depressant drug. This means it slows down the messages travelling between the brain and the body. It acts on the nerve cells of the brain disrupting communication between nerve cells and other cells of the body. It does this by altering the actions of two major neurotransmitters in the brain. These chemical messages, or neurotransmitters, enable nerve cells to talk to each other and to other cells in the body. When you use alcohol, it suppresses the activities of certain nerve pathways and you can appear sluggish, lethargic and slow-moving.

HOW DOES ALCOHOL AFFECT US?

Using Thorley's model, we can examine the effects of alcohol on your body, your mind and your future.

Thorley's model focuses on the problems related to different patterns of drug use associated with dependence, regular use and intoxication. Let's find out more.

Problems of intoxication. This can be a single occasion of risky level drinking. Some of you may have observed these sorts of consequences of alcohol use or experienced them yourself.

Physical impacts can be things such as: vomiting; accidents such as falling over, tripping or drowning; passing out; having a hangover; become sexually vulnerable including having unsafe or unwanted sex; or blacking out. You can even cause damage to your developing brain by drinking at risky levels.

Socially you may feel embarrassed because you have done something regrettable, you may get into trouble with your parents, have to lie or keep secrets, or become aggressive or violent.

Legally you could get in trouble with the law for underage drinking, causing a disturbance, or drink driving.

If you continue down the path of regular alcohol use, using over a longer period of time, there are added consequences including – you may lose your job or not be able to take a chosen career path, there could be further damage to your developing brain, and socially you may become more isolated due to some of your social behaviours.

If alcohol use continues, dependence on the drug may become an issue. Isolation, anxiety, social problems, homelessness, loss of control, withdrawal symptoms, accidents, and further medical and health problems, may be experienced.

Using Thorley's model helps us to understand more about alcohol use and the different patterns or levels of drinking. It also helps us to recognise that most difficulties for young people will arise from intoxication, which is drinking at risky levels, or regular use which is drinking every (most) weekend(s) over a sustained period. That said, even though some young people your age are choosing to drink alcohol, the majority are not. In fact, based on recent data collected from the Australian Secondary Students' Alcohol and Drug (ASSAD) survey, more and more young people are making the decision to abstain from drinking alcohol (White & Williams, 2016).



HOW DOES ALCOHOL AFFECT THE DEVELOPING BRAIN?

During adolescence, it's easy to see the changes in your body but it's not so obvious that your brain is also going through a significant growth period. In your teens and your twenties and even into your thirties and beyond (Sommerville, 2017), your brain continues to grow and change as the synapses that connect all the different neurons become more complex and efficient.

Research tells us that alcohol can affect two crucial parts of the brain - the hippocampus which is responsible for memory and learning, and the prefrontal lobe which is important for planning, judgement, decision making, impulse control and language (alcohol.think.again, 2014). The body of research about the effects of alcohol on the developing brain is still growing however there are studies that have shown physical changes in the brain and evidence of impaired problem solving and other cognitive function resulting from young people's alcohol use (Allsop, 2012). For this reason and other reasons, some of which have been briefly discussed, the National Health and Medical Research Council (2009) recommends that if you are under 18, you consume no alcohol and delay the initiation of drinking for as long as possible.

WHAT CAN HAPPEN WHEN YOU MIX ALCOHOL WITH OTHER DRUGS?

We know that any drug has the potential to cause harm but when drugs are combined there can be additional unpredictable consequences. For example, if you mix alcohol and cannabis you can experience nausea, vomiting, panic attacks, anxiety and paranoia. The caffeine found in energy drinks, when mixed with alcohol, can mask the depressant effects of the alcohol. You may feel more alert than you would otherwise and as a result, you may drink more alcohol and become more impaired than you realise. This can increase your risk of harm.

WHAT'S THE LAW SAY?

The WA *Liquor Control Act 1988* includes a number of laws to minimise harm for youth under the age of 18. It states that:

- it's an offence for anyone under the age of 18 years to purchase, attempt to purchase or obtain liquor from any other person on licensed or regulated premises
- it's an offence for L or P plate drivers or riders to have a Blood Alcohol Concentration (BAC) of more than zero
- police can issue on the spot fines to young people who break the laws. Police also have the powers to seize any alcohol, open or unopened, in certain situations
- it's an offence for anyone to supply under 18s with alcohol in a private setting without parental or guardian permission. This is the new secondary supply law that came into effect in WA in November 2015.

Thinking about everything we have covered, our key messages for alcohol use are:

1. Alcohol use can affect your body, your mind and your future.
2. Consider the effects of alcohol use on your developing brain.
3. For under 18s, no alcohol is the safest choice.



NEED HELP?

If you or anyone you know is experiencing a drug use issue, contact WA's 24hr Drug and Alcohol Support Line.

- Metro (08) 9442 5000
- Country 1800 198 024
- Emergency 000

Live chat with a qualified and experienced drug counsellor is also offered at:
<http://drugaware.com.au>



CONTACT

Road Safety and Drug Education Branch
 Department of Education
 Tel: (08) 9402 6415
 Web: www.sdera.wa.edu.au
 Email: sdera.co@education.wa.edu.au

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