

HOW ALCOHOL HARMS YOUNG PEOPLE AND WHAT YOU CAN DO ABOUT IT



World Health
Organization

Western Pacific Region



One person dies from alcohol-related harm every minute in the Western Pacific Region. Due to their biological and psychological vulnerability, young people are more at risk of alcohol-related injuries, risky sexual behavior and suicidality. Excessive alcohol consumption can impair relationships and participation in education and employment.

Drinking is occurring more frequently, and beginning at younger ages. One in three current drinkers in the Region aged 15-19 years have engaged in excessive drinking. (1)

Effective interventions are available to protect younger generations from alcohol related harm – we must act now.

HOW ALCOHOL HARMS



The self

Drinking alcohol negatively affects balance and motor skills. The effects can be especially pronounced in young people*, even at low levels of consumption. (2)

With drinking, there is a higher risk of:

- abnormal brain development, leading to memory and learning impairment (3)
- academic problems, such as low grades in school (4)
- psychiatric disorders, such as depression and anxiety (1)
- drug abuse and tobacco use (1)
- noncommunicable diseases, such as cancer of the oral cavity, pharynx, larynx, oesophagus, liver, colorectum and female breast; cardiovascular disease; and liver cirrhosis (1, 5)



The real cost of alcohol



**3.3
MILLION**

Every year, 3.3 million people die because of alcohol consumption in the world. (1)



**1
MINUTE**

In the Western Pacific Region, one person dies every minute from alcohol-related causes. (1)

* Definitions of "young people" vary depending on cultural, political and legal contexts. Generally, young people are those aged 10–24 years. For more information see: Young people's health—a challenge for society. Report of a WHO Study Group on Young People and "Health for All by the Year 2000". Geneva, World Health Organization, 1986 (WHO Technical Report Series, No. 731; <http://www.who.int/iris/handle/10665/41720>)



The self and other individuals

With drinking, there is an increased risk of:

- road traffic injuries
- violence
- risky sexual behaviours (with related risks of unwanted pregnancies and sexually transmitted infections) (6, 7)

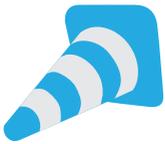


To society

Harmful drinking entails economic costs, such as increased expenses for health care, law enforcement and other criminal justice services, and repairing property damage and loss. Together, these impacts far outweigh the revenue from alcohol. (8, 9)

Economic costs of alcohol consumption also include losses in workplace productivity and efficiency resulting from impaired health and premature death. (10)

Drinking involves a wide range of physical and emotional consequences, from a temporary hangover to the lifelong pain of losing a loved one in an alcohol-related road traffic crash.



49%

In New Zealand, in 2011, 49% of at-fault drivers in alcohol- and drug-related road traffic crashes were aged 15–24 years. (11)



3.3%

The Republic of Korea lost 3.3% of gross domestic product (GDP) in 2000 in association with alcohol-related harm. (8)



\$14 TRILLION

The societal costs attributable to alcohol use in Australia in 2010 were estimated to be more than AU\$ 14 trillion. (9)

THE PROBLEM IS WORSE THAN YOU THINK.

Alcohol use crosses age, cultures and social situations. It may be tempting to dismiss alcohol as a known or innocuous substance, yet many popular beliefs regarding alcohol are misleading.

Myth:

Alcohol isn't very harmful to young people.

Fact:

Alcohol use is the single biggest risk factor for deaths among young people aged 15–29 years. The number of deaths due to alcohol is 30% higher than the number of combined deaths from the next two leading risk factors, occupational risks and illicit drug use. (12)

Myth:

Drinking is good for your health.

Fact:

There is no evidence that drinking alcohol has any health benefits for young people. (13) Some research has shown a potential protective effect on some heart diseases, but this only applies to middle-aged and older drinkers under certain conditions. (14, 15) Regardless of age, exercise and proper diet will contribute much more to a healthy life than any minor potential gains related to drinking alcohol.

Myth:

Young people can't become alcoholics because they haven't been drinking long enough.

Fact:

Anyone at any age can develop alcoholism. Indeed, young people are at greater risk of developing alcoholism due to their brains' particular sensitivity to alcohol as well as the positive social feedback associated with heavy drinking in some peer groups. (15)

WHY DO YOUNG PEOPLE DRINK?

Young people drink for a variety of reasons. Complex, interrelated factors influence young people's drinking behaviour and consequences.

It's accessible.

Laws on drinking and purchasing alcohol vary from place to place. While laws in some countries and areas establish a minimum drinking age—deterring underage drinking—others merely provide for a minimum alcohol purchase age. Some countries and areas do not have any laws on a drinking or a purchasing age.



Physical environment factors such as location and business hours of alcohol outlets also affect access to alcohol. Young people living in neighbourhoods where alcohol outlets are concentrated tend to drink more. (16, 17) In many countries and areas, home-produced alcohol beverages are available, and commercially produced alcoholic beverages are often sold at affordable prices, which allows more consumption by young people.

It's accepted.

How young people perceive drinking norms has a significant impact on their drinking behaviour. (18) For instance, young people who live in a community where binge drinking (episodic heavy drinking with the intention of getting drunk) is seen as daring and tough may try to drink more. Norms are also reflected in the laws of a community pertaining to drinking and how strictly these laws are enforced.

Home and peer circles are also significant factors in the drinking patterns of young people. (19, 20) Parents who drink more and have a higher tolerance for drinking tend to

have children who drink more as well. (21) In addition, parents and peers can be sources of alcohol when young people themselves have difficulty purchasing it.

It's made attractive.

Alcohol marketing, depicting drinking as cool, done by beautiful people and in marvellous situations, has been an effective method of affecting alcohol-related attitudes and perceptions among young people. (22, 23) Many of these methods are similar to those used for tobacco marketing. (24)

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While traditional marketing methods, such as advertisements and point-of-sale promotions, are critical elements for alcohol marketing, indirect marketing and use of new technologies are also becoming increasingly popular.

Here are some examples of indirect marketing methods.

- **Product placement** in movies and on television gives audiences a clear image of the product by showing the situation in which the product is being used (how, by whom, when and where), thereby reinforcing the perceived social norm that drinking is an accepted social behaviour. Alcohol brand appearances in American movies increased by 80% between 1996 and 2009. (25)
- **Brand extension** can relate alcohol brands to nonalcoholic products and services, thus familiarizing young people with alcohol. Brand extension

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