

Parents have critical role in preventing teen drinking

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Fewer teenagers are drinking alcohol but more needs to be done to curb

the drinking habits of Australian school students, based on the findings of the latest study by Adelaide researchers.

More than 2800 South Australian students aged 12-17 took part in a survey of [drinking behaviour](#), conducted by researchers from the University of Adelaide's School of Psychology and the Population Health group at the South Australian Health and Medical Research Institute (SAHMRI).

The results of the study, now published in the journal *BMC Public Health*, provide a snapshot of the prevalence of [alcohol](#) consumption among students, and the factors that most influence their [drinking](#) behaviour. This research has been supported by Cancer Council SA and SA Government.

"Harmful alcohol use is a serious problem in Australia, and drinking patterns are often first set in adolescence," says lead author Jacqueline Bowden, behavioural scientist and Manager of Population Health Research at SAHMRI, and researcher with the School of Psychology, University of Adelaide.

"With alcohol contributing to four of the top five causes of death in young people, and a leading cause of cancer in our community, it's important for us to better understand drinking behaviour among young people so we can help to prevent or delay it.

"One of the major messages from our study is that parents have more influence on their teenagers' decisions regarding alcohol than they probably realise. Parental behaviour and attitudes towards alcohol really do make a difference, and can help prevent children from drinking at an early age."

The study found:

- By age 16, most students had tried alcohol
- A third of students reported that they drank alcohol at least occasionally
- Only 28% of students were aware of a link between alcohol and cancer
- Across all ages, students were less likely to drink if their parents showed disapproval of underage drinking
- Those aged 14-17 were less likely to drink if they knew about the link between alcohol and cancer
- Smoking and approval of drinking from friends were more likely to result in drinking
- Once young people have become regular drinkers, the main predictor for drinking is the perceived availability of alcohol
- Cashed up students are more likely to drink.

Lincoln Size, Chief Executive Cancer Council SA, says: "The evidence is clear that alcohol use is a cause of cancer. Any level of alcohol consumption increases the risk of developing an alcohol-related cancer; the level of risk increases in line with the level of consumption.

"This latest evidence highlights the need to educate [young people](#) about the consequences of alcohol consumption and for parents to demonstrate responsible drinking behaviour. We need to get the message through that what may be considered harmless fun actually has lifelong consequences.

"We know that alcohol causes cancers of the mouth, pharynx, larynx, oesophagus, bowel in men and breast among women. There is also probable evidence that alcohol increases the risk of bowel cancer in women, and liver cancer.

"Cancer Council SA recommends that to reduce their risk of [cancer](#), people limit their consumption of alcohol. For individuals who choose to drink alcohol, Cancer Council SA recommends that they drink only

within the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) guidelines for [alcohol consumption](#)," he said.

Ms Bowden says we need to address the issue of supply to teenagers. "Many parents believe providing their children with alcohol in the safe environment of their home teaches them to drink responsibly. However, the weight of evidence suggests that this increases consumption, and is not recommended.

"Our results also found that those adolescents who thought they could buy alcohol easily were more likely to drink regularly. The issue of availability – including price – and marketing of alcohol in the community is a major hurdle to be overcome.

"Alcohol is more affordable in Australia than it has been in the past 30 years, and the number of premises selling alcohol in Australia has increased substantially in the past 15 years. Throw advertising and sports sponsorship into the mix and we have some very strong messages that alcohol is the norm," Ms Bowden says.

"Our evidence shows that that parents have a significant and substantial role to play, to help their kids develop a healthier relationship with alcohol early. Parents can set the boundaries and create clear expectations."

Ms Bowden says parents should:

- Discuss alcohol use with their children, and the fact that not everyone drinks
- Get to know upcoming activities, such as parties, and set expectations for behaviour
- Reconsider drinking in front of children, as most alcohol is consumed by adults at home

- Have alcohol-free events
- Avoid binge drinking
- Don't buy alcohol for adolescents or provide it at parties.

"We often forget that alcohol is the most widely used recreational drug in Australia and has an enormous cost on families. It is important that parents set the right example," Ms Bowden says.

More information: Jacqueline A. Bowden et al. Prevalence, perceptions and predictors of alcohol consumption and abstinence among South Australian school students: a cross-sectional analysis, *BMC Public Health* (2017). [DOI: 10.1186/s12889-017-4475-5](https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-017-4475-5)

Provided by University of Adelaide

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