Positive Choices
Drug and Alcohol Information
Get informed, stay smart, stay safe

Research recap: how does social media affect drug use in teens?

As teenagers spend more time online, how does this affect their drug use? Find out what the latest research says.

In the age of technology, social media and digital communication play a major role in the lives of teenagers. Ninety-eight percent of 15-17-year old Australian teenagers use the internet and the majority of these teenagers access it for social networking (ABS, 2016-2017). As teenagers increasingly spend more time online, how does this affect their use of alcohol and other drugs?

Social media exposes teenagers to alcohol-related advertising and substance-related content from their peers. Social media posts from peers and other teenagers may glorify the use of alcohol and drugs, as it is often portrayed in a positive light. A recent US study found a link between using the internet for social interaction and past month drug use (alcohol, cannabis, vaping) amongst teenagers. This included activities such as using social media for 3+ hours per day. Similarly, a recent Swedish study found a link between internet activities and alcohol use amongst teenagers. Socially oriented activities such as social media use was associated with a greater likelihood of lifetime alcohol use and past drunkenness, compared to using the internet for news consumption and playing games. Taken together, evidence is continually emerging on the associations between increased social media use and increased use of alcohol and other drugs among teens. However, it is important to remember that this relationship is influenced by other factors such as peer influence i.e. number of friends that have been drunk (positively associated with drinking) and parental monitoring (negatively associated with drinking).



Parents have a major influence on their child's engagement in risky behaviours, including the use of alcohol and other drugs. Research has begun to explore whether parental monitoring of social media use can reduce the impact of social media on drinking frequency early in adolescence, and preliminary evidence shows this might be the case. Parents can monitor their teen's social media use in a number of different ways. Monitoring methods that involve restricting the specific sites a teen is allowed to engage with, or the amount of time a teen is allowed spend on social media, are considered passive. By contrast, engaging a teen in critical discussion about what they see on social media is an example of an active monitoring method. Active methods of parental social media monitoring are more likely to be beneficial than passive methods, though this window of influence may be limited. Research has found that parental monitoring of social media use at age 13 may moderate links between social media and alcohol use in the short term, but not the long term. In summary, it's important to begin supporting children at an early age to form healthy habits around social media through active engagement.

Tips for engaging your teenager in a critical discussion about social media:

- Ask your teenager what they think about content posted by their friends and peers e.g. *"do you think what your friends post on social media is a true representation of their lives?"*
- Ask your teenager to think critically about alcohol-related advertising e.g. *"do you see alcohol advertising on social media?"* and *"how do the advertisers make you feel about drinking alcohol?"*. You can find some ideas on how to get your teenager to think critically about alcohol-related advertising in this worksheet.
- Encourage open communication about what your teenager thinks about social media. Ask questions such as *"how does social media benefit you?"*, *"why do you enjoy using social media?"* and *"is there anything you don't like?"*. You could also work together with your teenager to think about the pros and cons of using social media and create some household guidelines.
- Speak to your teenager about how they can have safe and enjoyable experiences online. For more tips on discussing cyber safety, visit the eSafety Commissioner website here.
- Let your teenager know that it is safe to talk to you when they are concerned or curious about content they see related to alcohol and drugs. For more tips on talking to a young person and alcohol and other drugs, click here.
- Encourage involvement in other activities they enjoy that don't involve social media. Research shows that young people are less likely to use drugs or drink alcohol if they are participating in activities such as sport, art, and cultural activities.

Watch this webinar to learn more about the relationship between social media use and drinking, and how parents can protect their teenager from alcohol-related harms.

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