Positive Choices
Drug and Alcohol Information
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The ‘Sober Curious’ movement: why more young people are choosing not to drink alcohol

What is the ‘Sober Curious’ movement?

The sober curious movement encourages people to question the role that drinking alcohol plays in their life, and to be open to socialising, celebrating, and dealing with stress without drinking. People who are sober curious are choosing not to drink alcohol, or to drink less, to improve their physical, mental, and social health and wellbeing.

The sober curious movement is part of a larger trend in alcohol consumption in Australia. While alcohol remains the most commonly used recreational drug in Australia, alcohol use has been decreasing and it appears that young people are driving this trend. The 2019 National Drug Strategy Household Survey (NDSHS) found that an increasing proportion of young Australians are choosing to reduce how much they drink at any one time. There are also more young Australians choosing not to drink at all, with the proportion of teenagers aged 14-19 not drinking alcohol increasing from 25% in 2001 to 56% in 2019. However, while overall alcohol consumption is going down, the national survey found that many young Australians are still drinking at risky levels.

Why are more young people choosing not to drink alcohol?

The sober curious movement focuses on overall health, including the physical, social, and mental health benefits of limiting or stopping alcohol consumption. The 2019 NDSHS found that health was the main reason Australians were reducing their alcohol consumption. Research also suggests that health may be an important influence for young people, with teenagers mentioning concerns about mental health, physical appearance, and long-term health effects such as brain damage and alcohol dependence. Some young people also feel more authentic, connected, and in control when they are sober and say this helps them build stronger and more meaningful friendships.

Other research suggests that changes in parenting practices, such as fewer parents giving their teenagers alcohol and increased parental monitoring, may be affecting drinking rates. A recent study found that teenagers whose parents did not supply alcohol had reduced odds of binge drinking and experiencing alcohol-related harms, compared to teenagers whose parents did give them alcohol.

What are the health benefits of not drinking alcohol?

There are both immediate and long-term benefits of drinking less or not drinking at all .

Immediate benefits include avoiding hangovers, improving sleep, and reducing the risk of injuries and accidents that can result from drinking alcohol.

Long term, drinking less or not drinking at all can lower your risk of liver problems, brain damage, heart problems, diabetes, and numerous cancers. Drinking less alcohol is also associated with improved mental and social wellbeing.

Knowing the short and long-term benefits of reducing or eliminating alcohol consumption can be a great motivator. Read more about these benefits on the Alcohol and Drug Foundation’s website.

For some people, stopping their alcohol use suddenly can be dangerous. Heavy drinkers who want to stop or reduce their alcohol use should talk to their GP or drug and alcohol services about developing a plan to safely reduce their alcohol intake.

Other online resources

There are a number of online communities and programs which can help on the sober curious journey.

- Hello Sunday Morning is a community that provides support for people who want to reduce how much alcohol they drink. They share personal stories from people who have stopped drinking alcohol, and also provide suggestions for alternative activities that can replace alcohol consumption. These range from picking up a new hobby or sport, to exploring alcohol-free drinks.
- Inroads is an online program developed by researchers and clinical psychologists in collaboration with young people to help 17-30-year-olds who have concerns about their drinking and anxiety. The five-module online program is self-guided and helps young adults develop skills to cope with anxiety and life stresses. Get access to the Inroads program for free.
- Challenges such as Dry July, Dry January, and Sober October encourage participants to avoiding drinking alcohol for a month, and often involve fundraising for charities. This can help provide motivation and support, and there is some evidence that participation is associated with increased wellbeing and better control over drinking.

School staff and parents – what can you do to support young people?

Teachers can help support students and protect against alcohol related harms by letting students know that most teenagers do not use alcohol, communicating effectively, and implementing evidence-based programs. Positive Choices has developed factsheets and reviewed recommended programs to help.

Parents can also play a role in protecting against alcohol use and related harms, including by being a good role model and communicating information and expectations. Read more about how in our factsheet.

Other sources of help can be found here.

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