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

What does the latest Australian data say about young people's alcohol, tobacco, and illicit drug use?

Young Australians are having their first drink later in adolescence, but more are using e-cigarettes.

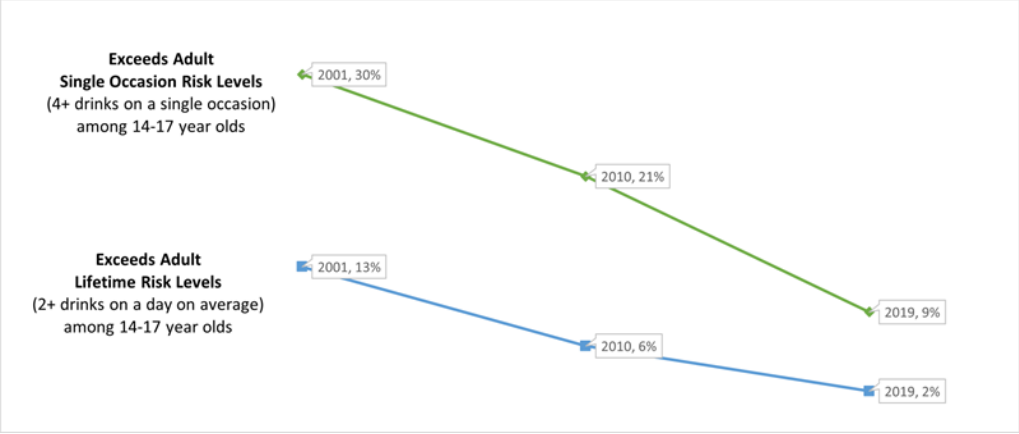
The National Drug Strategy Household Survey (NDSHS) is conducted every 2-3 years and collects information on drug use in Australia. Results from the 2019 NDSHS were recently released, detailing the alcohol, tobacco, and illicit drug use behaviours of the Australian population. The survey included 22,274 respondents aged 14-years and over.

In this post we focus on young people (i.e. 14 to 17-year-olds), who made up 3.4% of respondents. Please note that statistics reported on the *Positive Choices* factsheets differ from those presented here, as they are derived from the 2022-2023 Australian Secondary Students' Alcohol and Drug Survey (ASSAD), which provides data on tobacco, alcohol and drug use among a large sample of students between 12- to 17-years, and thus is most relevant to our target age group.

Alcohol

Over the past 20 years there have been positive changes in young people's drinking habits, including teenagers drinking less and starting to drink at a later age. In 2001 the average age people had their first drink was 14.7 years compared to 16.1 years in 2019. Among the 14-17-year-old age group, 66% had never had a full serve of alcohol. Among adolescents, 13% (1 in 8) reported drinking at least monthly, and 3% (1 in 33) reported drinking weekly or more often. Pre-mixed spirits were the most popular drink for those who did drink.

Among 14-17-year-olds, 9% had engaged in binge-drinking (drinking 4+ drinks on a single occasion). The good news is the prevalence of binge-drinking has been declining considerably over the years, as has the rate of lifetime risky drinking (2+ drinks a day), see figure below. However, it is important to note that any drinking at this age (14 to 17) is risky, and **the national health guidelines recommend that children and young people under 18 avoid alcohol completely** due to the risk of injury and other harms.



Smoking

In the past 20 years the number of 14-17-year-olds smoking daily has declined by almost 80%. While in 2001 11.2% of adolescents were smoking daily, in 2019 the prevalence has declined to 1.9%. Like the trends observed for alcohol use, young people are initiating smoking at a later age. The average age of initiation was 15.7-years in 2001, and it has increased to 16.6-years in 2019.

While cigarette smoking has been declining among young Australians, the proportion of 14-17-year-olds who reported smoking e-cigarette in the past year had changed, from 0.9% in 2016 to 1.8% in 2019. Of particular note, 65% of 14-17-year-olds who used e-cigarettes had never smoked a cigarette previously. Curiosity was the main reason reported by teenagers for trying an e-cigarette. For more information about e-cigarettes and the short and long-term effects see our factsheethere.

Cannabis

In 2019, cannabis remains the most used illicit drug among young people in Australia (10% ever use), followed by ecstasy (1.6%), cocaine (0.6%), and meth/amphetamine (0.6%).

Between 2016 and 2019, the proportion of young people who had ever used cannabis remained unchanged at 10%. Interestingly, among those who had used cannabis in the past year there were two dominant patterns of use. About a quarter (29%) reported infrequent use (1-2 times per year) while another quarter (26%) reported regular use (1+ times per week).

In Summary

Overall, the National Drug Strategy Household Survey indicates alcohol use is declining among 14-17-year-olds in Australia, while use of cannabis appears stable and a small proportion of young people are now using e-cigarettes. Young people often overestimate how common it is to use alcohol and other drugs, and this misperception can be perpetuated through traditional and social media. The misperception that 'everyone is doing it' is one of the risk factors for drug and alcohol use among young people, so it is important to be equipped with accurate information that is guided by the most recent data. To learn more about drug and alcohol use among teenagers, check out our factsheet: how many young people in Australia use alcohol or other drugs.

You can read the full National Drug Strategy Household Survey 2019 report here.

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