Positive Choices
Drug and Alcohol Information
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Factsheet

The link between substance use, mental health, and other lifestyle behaviours



Evidence ratings:

This resource has undergone expert review. See our Help/Q&A section for more details.

Year:

Targeted Drugs: Alcohol, Drugs (General), Tobacco

Tags: Lifestyle behaviours, Physical activity, Diet, Screen time, Sleep

Origin: Australian

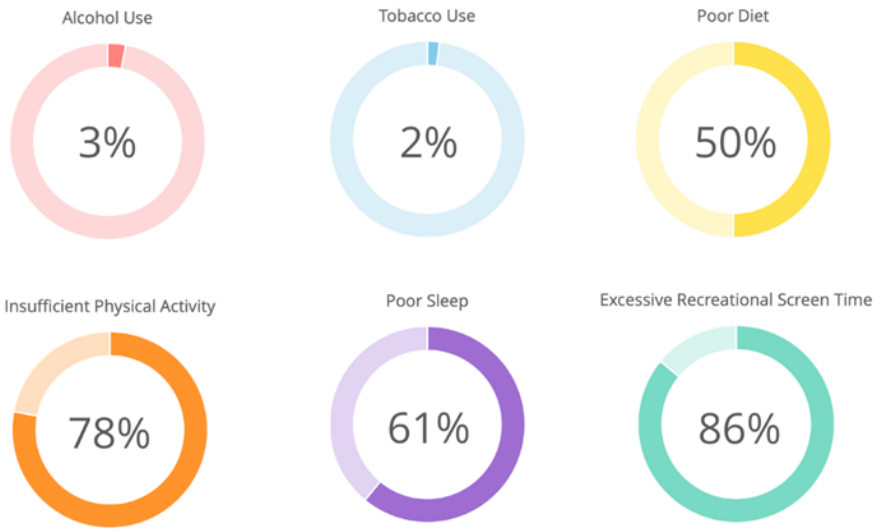
Cost:
Free

Lifestyle risk behaviours and chronic disease

During adolescence, many habits and routines are formed which often continue into adulthood. This is especially true for lifestyle risk behaviours. Lifestyle risk behaviours have been identified as major causes of chronic diseases (e.g., obesity, type 2 diabetes, and cardiovascular disease) and mental health problems, such as depression and anxiety. The Big 6 lifestyle risk behaviours that often emerge during adolescence are:

- Alcohol use
- Smoking
- Poor diet
- Physical inactivity
- Poor sleep (long or short duration and/or poor quality)
- Sedentary recreational screen time

A recent study investigated the prevalence of the Big 6 lifestyle risk behaviours among a sample of 6,640 Australian 11-14 year olds (12.7 years on average). The prevalence of these behaviours among this group is shown below.



The link between substance use, mental health, and other lifestyle behaviours.

Lifestyle risk behaviours commonly co-occur. For example, adolescents who use alcohol or other drugs are also more likely to eat poorly. In fact, research shows that 63% of Australian teenagers engage in three or more risk behaviours, and 26% engage in four or more at a given time. Additionally, the strongest associations are often seen between substance use and other risk behaviours, where adolescents who initiate alcohol or other drug use at an earlier age are more likely to concurrently engage in other lifestyle risk behaviours.

Helping young people improve one health behaviour can motivate them to improve another health behaviour, this is known as multiple health behaviour change. See below for examples of how the Big 6 lifestyle risk behaviours affect one another and how engaging in *healthy* behaviours can improve both physical and mental health.

Alcohol use	Alcohol use is associated with later sleep times, oversleeping, and poor-quality sleep. Restless or poor-quality sleep has also been shown to predict early onset of alcohol use. People with moderate to heavy alcohol use are also more likely to have unhealthy lifestyles overall, characterised by a poor diet and cigarette use. Additionally, consumption of foods high in fat and sugar has been linked with regular alcohol use. **Avoiding alcohol use in adolescence has been associated with better physical health, reduced aggression, improved self-regulation, and lower rates of depression and anxiety.**
Smoking	Research suggests that abstaining from cigarette smoking in adolescence decreases the odds of having mental health symptoms and other substance use disorders. Adolescent tobacco smoking increases the likelihood of early adult tobacco use, the initiation of alcohol use, and the subsequent development of alcohol related problems. Also, cigarette smoking and sleep have a bi-directional relationship in youth. **Young people who do not smoke tend to have more consistency between their weekend and weekday bedtime and an earlier wake-up time on weekends. Young people who do not smoke are also less likely to develop alcohol use disorders, and are less likely to meet criteria for mood disorders, anxiety disorders, and psychosis, when compared to smokers.**
Diet	A healthy diet that limits consumption of sugar sweetened beverages leads to better adherence to screen time guidelines and longer sleep duration in adolescents. High fat snacking also tends to co-occur with TV viewing. A healthy diet may also protect adolescents from problematic alcohol use, as diets high in fat and sugar during childhood have been shown to predict regular use of alcohol in adolescence. **A healthy diet high in fruits and vegetables, and low in added sugar and fats, have been shown to improve mental health. Specifically, a healthy diet can protect adolescents from emotional and behavioural problems and is critical for learning and memory.**
Physical activity	Physical activity has been found to be positively related to diet, sleep, and non-smoking. For example, young people who achieve the recommended amounts of physical activity are more likely to eat healthily, abstain from smoking, and report falling asleep earlier and feeling less tired throughout their day. **In contrast, regular physical activity has been associated with a decreased risk of sadness, low self-esteem, and depressive symptoms in adolescence. Physical activity also helps to improve sleep quality which in turn helps maintain mood and reduces fatigue.**
Sleep	Healthy sleep duration has been associated with a higher likelihood of fruit consumption, vegetable consumption, water consumption, physical activity, and muscle-strengthening physical activity, and with a reduced likelihood of cigarette use, alcohol use, and intake of sugary drinks and treats. **Achieving the recommended amount of sleep has been associated with improved mood and better academic performance.**
Screen time	Excessive screen time has been associated with delayed bedtimes and reduced total sleep duration. Additionally, TV viewing is associated with lower intake of protein, minerals, vitamins, and total dietary fibre, and an increase in high-fat snacking. **Limiting recreational screen time has been shown to predict higher levels of physical activity.**

Promoting healthy behaviours

Engaging in healthy behaviours can not only **improve physical health**, but is also important for **promoting good mental health**. Below are some recommended guidelines for the different health behaviours and how you, as a parent, can encourage healthy habits among young people.

Alcohol use

- In Australia, alcohol guidelines are outlined by the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC).
- For children under 18 years of age the guidelines state:

> To reduce the risk of injury and harms to health, children, and people under 18 years of age should not drink alcohol.

- People under 18 are particularly vulnerable to the harmful effects of alcohol as the body and brain are still developing. Therefore, it's important to encourage the delay of alcohol consumption for as long as possible.
- As a parent or guardian you play an important role in helping prevent alcohol use. Research shows there's many ways you can reduce the chances of your child drinking alcohol or experiencing alcohol related harms. You can do this by:
  - Being a good role model.
  - Being involved in your child's life.
  - Setting rules and expectations about alcohol and other drug use.
  - Making time for your teenager.
  - Read more in How parents can protect against drug and alcohol use and related harms
- The Positive Choices website has a range of alcohol and other drug information for parents and families. Other factsheets which might be of interest include:
  - Should I give my teenager alcohol?
  - Ensuring your teenager stays safe when they're attending a party.
  - The unintended normalisation of alcohol: What role does the family play?

Smoking

- Cigarette smoking is linked to numerous immediate and long-term effects. Therefore, it is recommended that**young people stay smoke free**.
- Similar to preventing alcohol use you can prevent your teenager smoking through positive and supportive parenting practices. This can include:
  - Being a good role module.
  - Being involved in your child's life.
  - Setting rules and expectations about alcohol and other drug use.
  - Making time for your teenager.
  - Read more in How parents can protect against drug and alcohol use and related harms
- You can also help your teenager understand the immediate and long-term effects of cigarette smoking which are summarised in ourTobacco & Cigarettes: Factsheet.

Diet

- The Australian Dietary Guidelines provide up-to-date research based recommendations for eating healthy and promoting wellbeing.
- The five dietary guidelines include:
  - Guideline 1: To achieve and maintain a healthy weight, be physically active and choose amounts of nutritious food and drinks to meet your energy needs.
  - Guideline 2: Enjoy a wide variety of nutritious foods from these five food groups every day:
    - Plenty of vegetables, including different types and colours, and legumes/beans.
    - Grain (cereal) foods, mostly wholegrain and/or high cereal fibre varieties, such as breads, cereals, rice, pasta, noodles, polenta, couscous, oats, quinoa, and barley.
    - Lean meats and poultry, fish, eggs, tofu, nuts and seeds, and legumes/beans.
    - Milk, yoghurt, cheese and/or their alternatives, mostly reduced fat.
    - And drink plenty of water.
  - Guideline 3: Limit intake of foods containing saturated fat, added salt, added sugars and alcohol.
  - Guideline 4: Encourage, support, and promote breastfeeding.
  - Guideline 5: Care for your food; prepare and store it safely.
- There are many ways you can foster healthy dietary habits and a positive eating environment. Some ideas include:
  - Share meals together at a table. Try and make the time to sit down and have family meal time together. This is also a great opportunity to stay connected with your children, an important protective factor for alcohol and other drug prevention.
  - Have screen free meal times.
  - Provide access to healthy snacks, fruit, and vegetables.
  - Try and incorporate a variety of foods into meals, including new fruits and vegetables that your children may not have tried before.
  - Model healthy eating behaviours. By enjoying a range of foods from the five food groups.
  - Get your children involved! Spend time preparing and cooking meals together, make food something which is fun and enjoyable.

Physical activity

- Physical activity guidelines recommend **children and young people aged 5-17 should aim for 60 minutes per day of moderate to vigorous physical activity**.
- It doesn't have to be the full 60 minutes at once, multiple shorter sessions can be accumulated throughout the day.
- Vigorous activity doesn't have to be organised team sport or structured activities. It can include activities such as: dancing, martial arts, bike riding over to a friend's house, playing soccer with friends during lunch time, surfing or swimming.
- The guidelines also recommend incorporating muscle strengthening activities a few times a week. Examples of muscle strengthening activities include running, climbing, yoga, and weight lifting.
- It's also important for young people to limit sedentary behaviour (i.e., time sitting down especially on screens) and include several hours of light physical activity each day including walking to school, helping around the house, or playing with friends outdoors.
- Encourage your child to find a physical activity that they enjoy. People are more likely to continue something if they find it meaningful and enjoyable. Engaging in physical activity as a family can be a great way to find something your child enjoys.
- Parental modelling and parental support such as encouragement, involvement, and facilitation have been associated with greater physical activity among youth.

Sleep

- Getting enough good-quality sleep is vital for rest, recovery, and healthy development.
- Sleep recommendations differ across age groups. Each night it is recommended that:
  - Children aged 5 to 13 years get 9 to 11 hours of uninterrupted sleep.
  - Young people aged 14 to 17 years get 8 to 10 hours of uninterrupted sleep.
- Good sleep hygiene practices can assist with falling asleep and getting an uninterrupted sleep. Encourage your children to follow these good sleep hygiene behaviours.
  - Maintain a consistent sleep schedule with a similar bedtime and wake-up time each day.
  - Limit screen time before bed e.g., from phones, laptops, TVs etc.
  - Avoid caffeine from the late afternoon onwards.
- Research also shows that parent set bed-times can improve not only sleep duration but also mental health.
- Other parental factors which have been shown to be protective for adolescent sleep duration, quality, and daytime functioning include parental modelling of healthy sleep practices within an emotionally warm and functional family environment.

Recreational screen time

- Screen time recommendations are part of the Australian Governments 24-hour movement guidelines for children and young people.**The guidelines recommend that young people aged 5-17 should limit sedentary screen time to no more than 2 hours per day**. Note that this does not include screen time required for school work.
- Managing screen time can be a challenging task, especially as your children get older. See below for recommendations for limiting screen time.
  - Have a 'no screen' policy at meal times.
  - Where possible encourage non screen based activities and entertainment.
  - Set time and content rules around screen use.
  - Encourage your children to self-regulate their screen time. This gives them a sense of autonomy over their choices and allows them to be involved in decision making.

Evidence Base

This factsheet was developed following expert review by researchers at the Matilda Centre for Research in Mental Health and Substance Use including Senior Research Fellow Dr Katrina Champion.

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