

Influences on alcohol use

The following reasons have all been identified as people's use of alcohol:

Parents and family

Parents' drinking behaviour and favourable attitudes about drinking have been positively associated with adolescents' initiating and continuing drinking. Early initiation of drinking has been identified as an important risk factor for later alcohol related problems. Adolescents are typically first introduced to alcohol in the family home and parents are their most common source for obtaining alcohol. In addition to providing alcohol to their teenagers, parents appear to influence children via their attitudes to drinking and, more directly, through the modelling of alcohol use.

Peers

Peer affiliations and friendships. Some people drink because their friends do. Peer drinking and peer acceptance of drinking have been associated with adolescent drinking. Young people want to be social and fit in with friends at parties. In many social circles it is assumed, if not expected, that people will drink.

Environment

Research has determined that the environment in which people live and work heavily affects their attitudes and behaviour around drinking. Environmental influences on alcohol use include:

- acceptance of alcohol use by society
- access and availability (including price, number of outlets, and server practices)
- advertising and marketing both nationally and locally; and
- public policies regarding alcohol and enforcement of those policies.

Personal beliefs and values

Not surprisingly, having a positive attitude to alcohol is associated with a greater likelihood of drinking alcohol. Believing that drinking alcohol will enhance popularity and social bonding, or improve mood, for example by reducing anxiety, alleviating boredom or relieving depression, increase the likelihood of consumption of alcohol. Some other factors include:

- no risk in trying
- it couldn't happen to me
- curiosity
- individual choice
- adulthood aspirations
- perceptions of drinking alcohol norms
- risk taking propensity
- self esteem/self image



Physiological factors

Puberty and adolescence

Drug misuse during adolescence can be of particular concern as this is a time of cognitive and emotional development. Research (White, A. M. 2003) indicates that brain development continues into early adulthood. Brain functions such as self control, judgment and emotions undergo the greatest changes during adolescence and are shaped by experience. As a result, decisions made by adolescents such as excessive consumption of alcohol may influence their consequent brain development.

While the overall size of the brain increases little beyond early childhood, important structural and functional changes take place as one progresses from childhood to adulthood. Recent evidence suggests that, as a result of the changes in brain function that occur during adolescence, alcohol affects adolescents differently from adults. For more information, go to <http://sydney.edu.au/bmri/news/2009/drinkwise.pdf>

Genetics

Adolescents can drink due to a family history of alcoholism. According to some research, if a parent abuses alcohol, the risk of alcoholism increases in their children. Children who come from alcoholic families will experiment with drinking at an early age in comparison to children who don't come from a background of alcoholism.

In utero exposure (A term meaning within the uterus).

Fetal alcohol syndrome (FAS) is not a genetic or inherited disorder. It is a pattern of birth defects, learning, and behavioural problems that are the result of maternal alcohol use during the pregnancy. The alcohol freely crosses the placenta and causes damage to the developing embryo or fetus. Not all individuals from alcohol exposed pregnancies have obvious signs or symptoms of FAS; individuals of different genetic backgrounds may be more or less susceptible to the damage that alcohol can cause. The dose of alcohol, the time during pregnancy that alcohol is used, and the pattern of alcohol use all contribute to the different signs and symptoms that are found.