

Alcohol and young people: the importance of **spirits education**

Young people today are more likely to choose to drink spirits or premixed spirits ('ready-to-drinks' (RTDs) or 'alcopops') than they were in the past. Where beer and wine-based drinks were once the drinks of choice for the majority of young people, spirits such as vodka are now much more likely to be consumed.

When providing alcohol prevention activities and lessons teachers need to be aware that students are now coming into contact with spirits at an earlier age and many are unaware of the risks associated with their use. Spirits have a far higher alcohol content than beer and wine and some of the dangers include the following:

- **Spirits or premixed spirits enable you to drink more alcohol, much more quickly when compared to other drinks**
- **Due to the high alcohol content, it takes a comparatively small amount of spirits to cause alcohol poisoning or overdose**
- **The greater the alcohol content, the greater the damage to the adolescent brain**

- **Spirits are likely to increase the risk of liver damage, particularly for younger women**

Therefore the following messages around spirits should be considered by teachers when conducting any alcohol prevention activities in their classroom:

- **The popularity of spirits and premixed spirits is a comparatively new phenomenon. In the past, teenagers who drank alcohol were more likely to have drunk beer or wine-based drinks**
- **Drinking spirits increases the risk of a range of both short and long-term harms, particularly alcohol poisoning or overdose**
- **Premixed spirits are sweetened to disguise the taste, causing the drinker to be unaware of how much alcohol they are consuming, increasing the risk of something going wrong**

Alcohol prevention lessons focusing on the issue of spirits are vital to ensure that students are aware of the risks associated with products like vodka, prior to coming into contact with them.

What are spirits?

Alcoholic products are usually grouped into three general classes:

- **Beer**
- **Wine**
- **Spirits**

A distilled beverage, liquor, or spirit is an alcoholic beverage containing ethanol that is produced by distillation. Distilling is the process of separating the alcohol from a water/alcohol solution, by heating and fermenting either grain, fruit or vegetables.

Beer, cider and wine are not classed as spirits because they are 'undistilled' fermented beverages.

The term 'spirit' refers to a distilled beverage that contains no added sugar and has at least 20% alcohol by volume. Popular spirits in Australia include vodka, whisky, bourbon, rum, gin, rum, and tequila.

Here are a list of some of the most popular spirits and their source product:

Source	Distilled beverage
Grains:	
Barley	Whiskey
Corn	Whiskey, vodka
Wheat	Whiskey, vodka
Rice	Sake
Fruit:	
Grapes	Brandy, vermouth, cognac
Apples	Cider
Juniper berries	Gin
Vegetables:	
Potatoes	Vodka
Sugarcane/molasses	Rum
Agave	Tequila

Alcohol and young people: the importance of **spirits education**

Liqueurs are distilled beverages that contain added sugar and flavourings (popular products in Australia include Tia Maria and Kahlua). The difference between spirits and liqueurs is widely ignored; consequently all alcoholic beverages other than beer and wine are generally referred to as *spirits*.

Are spirits more alcoholic?

Different alcohol products contain varying concentrations of alcohol. Some products have limitations on their alcohol content due to their source product. For example, most yeasts cannot reproduce when the concentration of alcohol is higher than about 18%, as a result the alcohol content of beer and wine is limited to that level – around 20%.

Here are some of the most popular alcohol products in Australia and how much alcohol is contained in each:

Alcohol Product	Typical alcohol by volume
Low-alcohol beer	0%–1.2%
Cider	2%–8.5%
Beer	2%–12% (usually 4%–6%)
Premixed spirits (RTDs)	4%–17.5%
Wine	9%–18% (usually 12.5%–14.5%)
Vodka	35%–50% (usually 40%)
Rum	37.5%–80%
Gin	40%–50%
Whisky	40%–50%

Spirits have a much higher alcohol content than beer and wine. Drinking one bottle of vodka could be the equivalent of drinking almost 5 bottles of wine. Premixed spirits ('ready-to-drinks' (RTDs) or 'alcopops') do not have the same alcohol content but are usually very sweet and much easier to drink than spirits themselves, particularly for young people. Some premixed spirits, however, do have a very high alcohol content, with one can or bottle being the equivalent of well over two glasses of beer.

Why are spirits more popular today than they were in the past?

Young people today are more likely to choose to drink spirits or premixed spirits than in the past. Where beer and wine-based drinks were once the drinks of choice for the majority of young people, spirits such as vodka are now much more likely to be consumed.

There are a number of reasons why these drinks have become increasingly popular, some of these include:

- **Spirits are more affordable than they were in the past** – unlike wine, which has dropped in price since 1980, spirit prices have actually increased. Australian incomes have risen however, making all forms of alcohol more affordable
- **Marketing and promotion of spirits has changed dramatically** – vodka, in particular, is now marketed to a much younger age group than in the past. Where once spirit advertising targeted older men, drinks such as vodka are now closely associated with the youth nightlife scene, particularly for young women
- **Spirits provide better 'bang for their buck'** – if their intention is to drink to get drunk, some young people believe that spirits are able to achieve this more effectively for less money

Why are spirits so dangerous for young people?

Drinking any alcohol is potentially damaging for a young person and the longer they wait to start drinking, the healthier they will be. That said, some young people are going to choose to drink alcohol so it is important they are aware that spirits and premixed spirits are likely to be particularly risky for them during adolescence.

As well as having a far lower alcohol content, beer in particular, can be fairly 'self-limiting' for younger users as it can be difficult (although not impossible) for them to drink too much before they start to feel the adverse effects.

Some of the dangers of spirits include the following:

- **Spirits or premixed spirits enable you to drink more alcohol, much more quickly when compared to other drinks**

If a group of young people share a bottle of spirits between them in a session they are drinking the

Alcohol and young people: the importance of **spirits education**

equivalent of up to 22 glasses of full strength beer, 22 cans of mid-strength beer, more than 2 litres of a cask of red wine, or more than three bottles of champagne. For many young people, if they tried to drink this amount of wine or beer they would find it difficult to do so quickly. Spirits are much easier to consume quickly but doing so can be extremely dangerous. Drink too fast and by the time the negative effects are felt, too much has been consumed, and the drinker is then unable to modify their drinking in time to avoid feeling unwell

- **Due to the high alcohol content, it takes a comparatively small amount of spirits to cause alcohol poisoning or overdose**

It is important to remember that it takes much less vodka, rum or whisky to get drunk than beer or wine. It would only take minutes to drink two shots of vodka (60mls), whereas for most people it would take much longer to drink beer containing the equivalent amount of alcohol (two 285ml glasses – 570mls), thus greatly increasing the risk of poisoning or overdose

- **The greater the alcohol content, the greater the damage to the adolescent brain**

Research indicates that it is important to delay initiation to alcohol as long as possible as the developing brain is most vulnerable to the disruptive effects of alcohol. Adolescence is a period of our life when monumental changes are going on in our brains. In particular, the important areas of the brain involved in reasoning, planning, inhibition and emotion regulation are being developed. We know that the more alcohol the brain is exposed to, the more severe the effect, particularly in relation to the hippocampus – the part of the brain involved in learning and memory. If the adolescent brain is regularly exposed to an alcoholic product that contains more alcohol, such as spirits, it is likely that this will lead to greater problems. Any alcohol is going to be problematic. Drinking products with a higher alcohol content, such as spirits, at the same volume or higher, as those with lower levels of alcohol, such as beer or wine, is likely to increase the risk

- **Spirits are likely to increase the risk of liver damage, particularly for younger women**

Male and female livers are inherently different, particularly during puberty when male livers are exposed to periodic bursts of growth hormone. The male liver is fully developed around 18 years, the female liver, much later at around 21 years.

Exposing a young person's undeveloped liver to alcohol is problematic as they are not able to process the alcohol as well as an adult, leading to the possibility of one of a range of liver conditions – fatty liver, hepatitis and cirrhosis. Once again, drinking high alcohol content products, such as spirits, is going to increase this risk. Young women could potentially be at greater risk due to their livers developing at a later age. Recent studies in Australia have shown that the risk of young people being admitted to hospital with alcohol-related liver disease has risen more than tenfold over five years. The most worrying increase in alcoholic cirrhosis has occurred in those aged 20 to 29, the majority of who would have begun drinking in their early teens. Researchers have suggested that this increase could be due to the increase in the consumption of products with a higher alcohol content, such as spirits.

Implications for health teachers

Teachers need to be aware that students are now coming into contact with spirits at an earlier age and many are unaware of the risks associated with their use. It is therefore important that health teachers consider providing some basic information on the risks associated with spirit consumption, particularly for young people who may have little, if any, experience with alcohol. With that in mind, it is suggested that the following messages be incorporated into alcohol prevention activities delivered in their classroom:

- **The popularity of spirits and premixed spirits is a comparatively new phenomenon. In the past, teenagers who drank alcohol were more likely to have drunk beer or wine-based drinks**
- **Drinking spirits increases the risk of a range of both short and long-term harms, particularly alcohol poisoning or overdose**
- **Premixed spirits are sweetened to disguise the taste, causing the drinker to be unaware of how much alcohol they are consuming, increasing the risk of something going wrong**

Alcohol prevention lessons focusing on the issue of spirits are vital to ensure that students are aware of the risks associated with products like vodka, prior to coming into contact with them.

Alcohol and young people: the importance of **spirits education**

Resources

Unfortunately few, if any, alcohol education resources provide information or activities specifically around spirits. There are however a number of useful web-based resources that have activities that teachers could adapt, incorporating spirits messages. These include the following:

It Couldn't Happen To Me: A NSW Department of Education and Communities web-based resource that provides research, information, ideas and strategies for teachers who are looking at alcohol in the classroom. No spirits-specific activities but it does provide information on different types of alcohol and their alcohol content and the activities provided could easily be adapted to look at specific drinks and the particular risks associated with their use

Don't Turn A Night Out Into A Nightmare:

This is fairly old now but if you just want a couple of activities that get young people to think about positive choices and adapt them slightly to look at the specific risks associated with particular drinks, e.g., vodka, this may be useful

References

Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. (2014). *2013 National Drug Strategy Household Survey detailed report*. Drug statistics series no. 28. Cat. no. PHE 183. Canberra: AIHW. ([PDF downloadable version](#))

Callinan, S. & Ferris, J. (2012). *What do Australians drink? Analyses by demographic and social characteristics*. Centre for Alcohol Policy Research. ([PDF downloadable version](#))

Richardson, D. (2012). *The Liquor Industry. Technical Brief No. 14*. The Australia Institute. ([PDF downloadable version](#))

White, V. & Bariola, E. (2011). *Australian secondary school students' use of tobacco, alcohol, and over-the counter and illicit substances in 2011*. Cancer Council Victoria. ([PDF downloadable version](#))