Underage drinking is a problem noted nationwide. Adolescents and sometimes even younger children have consumed alcohol, with 90% of over 14 year olds having had alcohol at least once. Teenagers need to know the risks involved with underage drinking before they pay the ultimate price. As shocking as it is, 1 in 4 hospitalisations of people aged 15-24 happen because of alcohol, and 4 Australians under the age of 25 die due to alcohol-related injuries in an average week.

The risks and effects of alcohol on the teenage brain are horrific. The brain is the most important organ as it controls everything we say and do and doesn't develop until around 23 or 24 years of age. So drinking at the legal age of 18 can be harmful, as you could still acquire injuries associated with under aged drinking. Before the brain is fully developed its acquirement of important skills, such as learning, memory, planning, emotional stability, and thinking may be impaired through underage drinking. Drinking can stunt brain growth, stopping its ability to reach its full capacity, therefore underage drinkers may not do the best they can in life.

Short term effects of underage drinking are injuries from violence, road accidents, drowning, trauma, alcohol poisoning and unprotected sex. Long term harms are social impairment, brain damage, depression, chronic disease, cirrhosis of the liver and alcohol dependence. Who would want that?

If you live in Tasmania one of the laws involved with underage drinking is that a person shall not sell liquor to a minor. Also, another law is that a person under the age of 18 shall not enter licensed premises, purchase, collect, or drink liquor in a public place.

Despite these laws, many people still continue to drink illegally.

A portion of people in Australia today believe that it is acceptable for minors to drink. To support this, I did an interview at my High School. Surveying 26 people who were 14-16 years old, 11 people said that it was socially acceptable for the age group to drink. 7 said it wasn't acceptable, and 8 people said that they weren't sure. Reasons for their uncertainty were dependant on the situation. They said that it would be alright with adult supervision and on special occasions, but not in a party situation. What do teenagers really gain from drinking underage?

Teenagers think that they gain popularity and social acceptance when the drink but what they really gain is long term harm to themselves and the people around them. An example of the darker side of drinking is Taylor Meyer's story. Taylor was 17 when she died. On October 17, 2001, Taylor started drinking early in the evening; consuming hard liquor with and without energy drinks. The alcohol was believed to have been acquired from relatives or with fake IDs. It was a cold night on October 17. A friend of Meyer's told police that after drinking at an airport party, Meyer left to meet a cousin. As she left, she started walking in the wrong direction, with the party laughing at her. Friends set her straight, but she became lost again and wasn't seen again until her body, covered in bruises and abrasions, was discovered 3 days later, face down in a shallow pool on swampy grounds. Her blood-alcohol level registered 0.13 per cent at her autopsy.

Taylor Meyer's horrific story is just one extreme example of the consequences of drinking underage. Teenagers need to understand the risks of underage drinking before they step into the erratic and confusing world of alcohol.

By Siobhan McDonald