

Alcohol is the most commonly used drug in Australia, but curiously it is not always regarded as a drug by the community. Drinking in moderation does not harm most people; however, regular excessive drinking is associated with a variety of health, personal and social problems.

The National Health and Medical Research Council provides a set of guidelines for the Australian public to minimise harms associated with alcohol use.

A standard drink contains 10 grams (or 12.5 millilitres) of alcohol. For low risk drinking, the following recommendations are made for men and women (for more information go to www.alcoholguidelines.gov.au).

Women should have one or two alcohol-free days a week, and drink no more than:

- Two standard drinks a day, and no more than 14 standard drinks in a week
- Four standard drinks on any one occasion.

Men should also have one or two alcohol-free days a week, and drink no more than:

- Four standard drinks a day, and no more than 28 standard drinks in a week
- Six standard drinks on any one occasion.

Alcohol and pregnancy

The Australian Medical Association and the Royal Australian & New Zealand College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists indicate there is no safe level of alcohol use during pregnancy. The first few weeks after conception are the most critical, but women may not be aware they are pregnant. Alcohol use during pregnancy can effect the physical and mental development of a baby, causing irreversible disabilities such as foetal alcohol syndrome, learning difficulties, and can increase the risk of miscarriage or stillbirths. The same precautions apply to women who are breastfeeding because alcohol passes to the baby through breast milk.

Forms of the drug

Alcohol is produced by the process of fermentation of water, yeast, sugar, various grains, fruits or vegetables, and is available

in various strengths as a liquid. The strength is recorded on the bottle as a percentage. Common types are wine, beer, fortified wines (ports and sherries) and spirits, but people may also drink methylated spirits. Most alcohol products indicate the number of standard drinks in each container.

Examples of standard drinks (10 grams of alcohol) are:-

- One schooner of light beer (2.7%) 425ml
- One can of full strength beer (4.9%) 375ml
- One small glass of table wine 100ml (wine is often served in 150ml glasses - 1.5 standard drinks)
- One small glass of fortified wines such as port or sherry (20%) 60ml
- One shot, or nip, of spirits (40%) 30ml.

Note: Mixer drinks generally hold more than one standard drink; 375 ml cans hold 1.5 of a standard drink, 300ml bottles hold 1.2 of a standard drink.

Alcohol levels & driving

The following amounts are the limits to stay below the legal blood alcohol limit (BAC) of 0.05 for a licensed driver:

- For a man of average size, no more than two standard drinks in the first hour, and one standard drink per hour after that
- For a woman of average size, no more than one standard drink per hour.

However, there are no clear rules when it comes to BAC levels, and there are many variables such as your size, if you have recently eaten, taken medication or used other drugs. Alcohol will affect everybody differently.

Alcohol use in Australia

Alcohol is a very widely used drug, and has become part of the social and sporting culture. Alcohol is implicated or involved in



the majority of road accidents and domestic violence, and around 30% of deaths by drowning are alcohol-related.

In Australia, tobacco is the major cause of drug-related death and illness, with alcohol being the second major contributor.

Drinking and young people

Binge drinking (drinking to get drunk) amongst Australian teenagers is an increasing and worrying phenomenon. Risks associated with binge drinking include:

- Internal physical damage, including brain damage as the brain is not completely developed until about 25 years of age
- Alcohol poisoning/unconsciousness
- Using/trying other drugs
- Having unsafe sex
- Vulnerability to sexual assault
- Being involved in fights or criminal behaviour
- Dangerous activities such as car-surfing, driving recklessly, swimming and surfing when intoxicated.

Reducing the risks

- Have one or two alcohol-free days a week, and avoid binge-drinking.
- Don't participate in shouts or drinking games, don't mix drinks, buy your own drinks, and never leave your drink unattended (to avoid drink spiking)

- Eat before you plan to drink, and make every second drink a non-alcoholic drink i.e. water or soft drink
- Check the interaction of medications and alcohol if you are prescribed medications.

Dependency

People who regularly drink can develop tolerance, and will need to drink more to get the same effects. Regular drinkers can become physically dependent on alcohol, which means if they don't drink they will experience withdrawal symptoms.

Withdrawal

Withdrawal from alcohol is extremely stressful, physically and mentally, and carries higher physical risks than withdrawal from many other drugs. People may experience tremors, hallucinations or fitting, and will require the guidance of a doctor.

Mixing alcohol and other drugs

Combining alcohol with any other drug is extremely dangerous. Heavy drinking affects judgment, and may lead to the risky use of other drugs, including unsafe injecting practices or experimentation. Mixing alcohol with other depressants can significantly increase the risk of overdose as it may increase the effects. In the majority of fatal heroin overdoses, alcohol has also been involved. Combining alcohol with prescribed medications may decrease the effectiveness of these medications.

Overdose

Alcohol is a central nervous system depressant. Drinking too much can cause the body and nervous system to shut down to the point of unconsciousness, and in severe cases, may cause coma and risk of brain damage or death.

What to do if someone has been drinking heavily and passes out:

- If the person is drowsy, rouse them regularly to ensure they do not slip into unconsciousness. Snoring or gurgling sounds may indicate a person's airways are partially blocked. Do not let their head fall forward or back – this restricts oxygen flow to the lungs.
- If the person is unconscious, turn them on their side to reduce the risk of them vomiting and choking. Make sure their airways are clear. Do not leave them alone. Call an ambulance immediately on 000 or 112 from a mobile phone (you don't need credit or to be in range).
- If breathing has stopped, give mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. If there is no pulse, commence CPR (cardio-pulmonary resuscitation) if you are trained.

Detox and treatment

Whether at home or at a detox centre, detox from alcohol should be medically supervised. Withdrawal takes up to a week, and psychological dependency may continue for some time (or possibly forever). There are medical, non-medical, private and public detox centres available for alcohol withdrawal. Phone the Alcohol & Drug Information Service in your State (see rear cover), your local Area Health Service or Community Health Centre for details of services providing detox and support programs.

Different treatments and approaches will suit different people, and more than one option may need to be tried. Treatment and rehabilitation options include self-help groups, the 12-Step abstinence-based support and group programs, and controlled drinking and counselling support, which is offered at many outpatient counselling centres. Naltrexone has been used in the treatment of alcohol dependency for the prevention of relapse.

Tips for families

Some tips for supporting a loved one with a drinking problem are:

- Monitor your own use of alcohol and be a supportive role model.
- Keep communicating. Avoid pleading or nagging. Don't only talk about the problem. Choose your moment to express concern. Acknowledge that change is hard.
- If a person agrees to treatment, don't rush them. Recognise that relapse is part of the process.
- Stay safe, and know what to do if there is an overdose. If there is violence, have a safety plan in place. Being supportive does not mean you have to be at risk.
- It's okay to talk about it. Get support for yourself, even if they don't want help.

FDS acknowledges the National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre (NDARC) for this information.

EFFECTS

Alcohol is a depressant which slows down the central nervous system; responsible for our brain activity, coordination, reflexes and the rate our organs work at. Higher doses of alcohol can produce hallucinations, irrational behaviour, vomiting, convulsions, and in some cases, loss of consciousness.

Short-term effects of alcohol include:

- Immediate feelings of relaxation and less inhibition
- Reduced concentration and effects coordination and judgment
- Slurred speech and blurred vision.

Alcohol is broken down by the liver. A healthy liver takes about an hour to break down one standard drink. When sobering up, it takes time for the liver to do its job. Drinking black coffee, taking cold showers or exercising may help someone to feel more awake, but it will not reduce the alcohol content in their blood, or make the liver work faster. Vomiting will only remove the alcohol in the stomach that has not had time to be absorbed into the bloodstream. At most, the last drink might be eliminated.

Problems associated with alcohol use may include:

PHYSICAL PROBLEMS

- Organ damage particularly to liver and brain
- Heart and blood disorders and possible stomach inflammation
- Impotence and menstrual irregularity may also occur

EMOTIONAL & SOCIAL PROBLEMS

- Increased risk-taking behaviour such as unwanted or unsafe sex, drink driving
- Increased aggression leading to assaults
- Relationship and family problems
- Poor work performance, financial difficulties and legal problems.

MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEMS

- Alcohol may aggravate mental health symptoms. Depression and anxiety may initially reduce after a few drinks however can increase with heavy drinking
- Increased frequency and severity of mood swings
- Intensify disturbing thoughts and paranoia
- If you have experienced a psychotic episode, alcohol use may increase confusion and disorganisation, and also increase the risk of auditory and visual hallucinations.



Mixing alcohol and benzodiazepines

Great care needs to be taken when taking benzodiazepine medication such as valium, ativan, temaze (often known as temazepam), and drinking alcohol. As they are both depressant type drugs which slow down the central nervous system, the risk of accidental overdose is high when combined. If a doctor has prescribed these medications, it is important to be aware that they can make you drowsy, sleepy, confused and dizzy, and will slow down the heart and breathing rate – drinking alcohol will amplify these effects. If you need further advice or are concerned, talk to your doctor or chemist who can advise you on how to avoid running into problems whilst taking these types of medication.