

Alcohol

Alcohol is the most widely used social drug in Australia. Its use affects different people in different ways. While a small amount of alcohol may be beneficial to the heart for some older people, 'risky' drinking can cause serious health, personal and social problems. Heavy drinkers, 'binge drinkers' and very young drinkers are particularly at risk.

Recommended limits to reduce health risks from drinking vary according to age, gender and other factors. 'Binge drinking' is a particular problem among younger people, but anyone who drinks heavily or drinks too much in one session is at risk of both immediate and long-term alcohol-related harm. Drinking alcohol during pregnancy may also affect your baby.

If you plan to drive, it is better not to drink at all.

The standard drink

A standard drink contains 10g of alcohol. However, the size of a 'standard' drink can vary according to the type of alcohol. The size of a drink served in some hotels, restaurants or even at home may be much bigger than a 'standard' drink. Understanding how to count standard drinks can help you keep track of how much alcohol you consume.

One standard drink equals:

- 285ml or approximately one pot of regular beer (4.8% alcohol content)
- 375ml or one stubbie of mid-strength beer (3.5% alcohol content)
- 100ml or one small glass of table wine (13.5% alcohol content)
- 30ml of spirits plus mixer (40% alcohol content).

Cocktails can contain as much alcohol as five or six standard drinks, depending on the recipe.

Alcohol intake guidelines

The following guidelines can help you determine if your alcohol intake is harmful.

- **Adult men and women** – drinking up to two standard drinks in any one day puts you at low risk for alcohol-related problems. Four or more standard drinks at a time puts you at considerable risk of alcohol-related harm. Everyone should have one or two days free of alcohol a week.
- **Children and young people** – the safest choice for young people under 18 years of age is not to drink at all. Young people under 15 years of age are at the greatest risk of harm from drinking and are advised not to drink alcohol. If older teenagers (over 15 years) do drink, it should be under adult supervision and within the adult guideline for low-risk drinking (two standard drinks in any one day).
- **Pregnant and breastfeeding women** – the safest choice is not to drink alcohol while pregnant or breastfeeding or if you are planning to become pregnant.

The risk of injury and disease increases the more you drink. Any drinking above recommended levels carries a higher risk than not drinking. Mixing alcohol and other drugs – either illegal drugs or some prescription drugs – can cause serious health problems.

How the body processes alcohol

Alcohol gets into the bloodstream through the stomach and the small intestine. If a person has food in their stomach, it will slow down the rate at which the alcohol is absorbed but it will not stop a person becoming drunk. Eventually all the alcohol that was consumed will reach the bloodstream.

Most of the alcohol in the body (about 91%) is broken down by the liver. A small amount also leaves the body in urine, sweat and the breath. Since the liver can only break down about three-quarters of a standard drink an hour, sobering up takes time. Cold showers, exercise, black coffee, fresh air or vomiting will not speed up the process.

Effects of alcohol on your health

Alcohol can affect a number of body systems, including:

- **Cardiovascular system** – raised blood pressure and triglycerides (especially after binge drinking), damage to the heart muscle and stroke.
- **Nervous system** – brain damage, tremors, dementia and nerve damage. Alcohol is a depressant drug and affects your coordination, self-control, judgement and reaction times.
- **Gastrointestinal system** – stomach inflammation (gastritis) and bleeding.
- **Liver** – cancer, hepatitis (inflammation), fatty changes, cirrhosis and liver failure.
- **Endocrine system** – problems controlling blood sugar, loss of libido and reduced fertility.
- **Nutrition** – malnutrition (alcohol displaces nutrients from your body) and obesity.
- **Breast cancer and other gynaecological problems** – women who drink alcohol are at a higher risk than non-drinking women.

Binge drinking can be dangerous

'Binge drinking' is the term commonly used to describe drinking heavily over a short period of time with the intention of becoming intoxicated. The resulting immediate and severe intoxication can be very harmful to a person's health and wellbeing.

Drinking large amounts of alcohol can result in confusion, blurred vision, poor muscle control, nausea, vomiting, sleep, coma or even death. It can also impair a person's judgement and decision-making capacity, which can increase the risk that they may do silly things and put themselves in dangerous situations.

'Binge drinking' means different things to different people. New Australian recommendations were released in 2009. The *Australian Guidelines to Reduce Health Risks from Drinking* talk about drinking too much 'on a single occasion of drinking' rather than 'binge drinking', but the harm that can be done to the drinker and their community are essentially the same.

Health benefits of alcohol

Very moderate amounts of alcohol (around half a standard drink a day) may provide health benefits for some middle-aged or older people by reducing the risk of some types of cardiovascular disease. However, people who do not already drink alcohol are not encouraged to take up drinking just to get some health benefits.

Recent scientific evidence suggests that the potential for health benefits may have been overestimated in earlier studies. Possible benefits need to be balanced against the risk of cirrhosis, some cancers and other diseases (which becomes greater with increased alcohol consumption).

The same benefits do not extend to younger people. Drinking alcohol can affect how the brain develops in people under the age of 25. Teenagers under 15 years of age are particularly at risk.

Drinking alcohol could affect your unborn baby

Women who drink alcohol while pregnant are more likely to give birth to babies who are:

- Smaller
- Premature
- Born with a range of developmental, behavioural and physical effects – known as foetal alcohol spectrum disorder (FASD).

It may be that even a low intake of alcohol is harmful to your unborn baby. For this reason, pregnant women are advised to drink no alcohol.

Alcohol and breastfeeding

Alcohol is excreted into breast milk and can reduce milk supply. During the first 12 months of a baby's life, alcohol can cause damage to the developing brain. Women who are breastfeeding are advised to avoid consumption of alcohol.

If you choose to drink alcohol while breastfeeding, it is suggested that you wait up to two hours before breastfeeding your baby for each standard drink. For example, if you have two standard drinks you should wait four hours before you breastfeed.

Alcohol and driving

Alcohol can impair coordination and judgement and is a major cause of road injury in Australia. The rate of alcohol absorption in the body varies depending on body size, gender, body fat and amount of food in the stomach. The same person can drink the same number of drinks on different occasions and have different blood alcohol concentration (BAC) levels.

It is safest to avoid drinking alcohol if you need to drive or operate heavy machinery. If you **do** drink and drive, it is important to keep your BAC under the legal limit for driving (in Victoria, this is 0.05 BAC). Remember that alcohol takes time to leave the body. You may still have alcohol in your body several hours or even the day after drinking. Learner and probationary drivers and drivers of trucks, buses, trams and trains must maintain a zero blood alcohol limit.

It is not possible to say how many drinks any one person can drink to stay under a particular BAC. You can get some idea of your general blood alcohol level by recording your drinks and testing yourself over a number of occasions. Use a coin-operated breath tester – these are available in some venues.

How to drink responsibly

You can monitor your drinking if you:

- Start with a non-alcoholic drink.
- Eat before and while drinking to slow the absorption of alcohol into your bloodstream.
- Avoid salty snacks that make you thirsty and make you drink more.
- Make every second or third drink non-alcoholic.
- Try low alcohol drinks.
- Always keep your drink with you to minimise the risk of drink spiking.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- DrugInfo Clearinghouse Tel. 1300 858 584 – for information
- DirectLine Tel. 1800 888 236 – for counselling and referral
- Counselling Online – for online counselling and referral
- Family Drug Help – for information and support for people concerned about a relative or friend using drugs Tel. 1300 660 068

Things to remember

- Alcohol affects different people in different ways.
- Moderate alcohol intake may be beneficial for some middle-aged or older people but the same benefits do not apply to young people.
- Heavy and 'binge drinking' can cause serious health effects.
- Drinking while pregnant or breastfeeding may affect your baby.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

Australian Drug Foundation

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