
How alcohol affects your body

Summary

- Like all drugs, alcohol can damage your body, especially if you drink heavily every day or in binges.
 - Short-term effects of alcohol include hangover and alcohol poisoning, as well as falls and accidents, conflict, lowered inhibitions and risky behaviours.
 - Long-term alcohol consumption contributes to more than 200 different types of disease and injury.
 - If you choose to drink alcohol, low level drinking is better for you than heavy drinking or binge drinking.
 - There is no level of safe alcohol consumption.
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How alcohol affects your body

Many Australians enjoy a drink. In fact, alcohol is Australia's most widely used social drug. Like all drugs, alcohol can damage your body, especially if you drink heavily every day or in binges. Even small amounts of alcohol are still linked to the development of disease.

Alcohol affects your body in many ways. Some effects are immediate and last only a while; others accumulate over time and may significantly affect your physical and mental health and quality of life.

How much harm alcohol causes your body depends on how much you drink, your pattern of drinking, and even the quality of the alcohol you drink. Your gender, body size and composition, age, drinking experience, genetics, nutritional status, metabolism, and social factors all play a part.

The short-term effects of alcohol

The short-term effects of a single occasion of drinking too much alcohol can include:

- lowered inhibitions
- interpersonal conflict
- falls and accidents
- altered behaviour – including risky or violent behaviour
- hangover
- alcohol poisoning.

The severity of the short-term effects of alcohol typically depends on how much a person drinks, but other factors such as hydration and food consumption also play a role.

Hangover

You've probably heard of, or perhaps experienced, a 'hangover' – a set of unpleasant symptoms that usually follows excessive alcohol intake. Most people can recognise the signs and treat the symptoms themselves.

Generally, the more you drink the higher the likelihood you'll experience a hangover, but there's no way to predict how much you may be able to drink and avoid a hangover. Some people can experience a hangover from one drink.

The severity of a hangover often has to do with how your body metabolises alcohol, as when you drink, alcohol triggers a number of reactions in your body. These reactions can contribute to hangover. They include:

- frequent urination and dehydration
- an inflammatory response from your immune system
- irritation of the stomach lining

- a drop in blood sugar
- an expansion of blood vessels.

Depending on what you drank and how much, your hangover may include these symptoms:

- thirst
- headache
- muscle aches
- diarrhoea
- nausea
- fatigue
- weakness
- trembling or shaking
- rapid heart rate
- increased blood pressure
- dry mouth and eyes
- poor concentration
- increased sensitivity to light and sound
- a feeling that the room is spinning, or a sense of dizziness
- anxiety, depression, irritability and other mood disturbances
- poor, restless or less sleep.

Most hangovers typically start once your blood alcohol level returns to around zero. Hangovers generally only last up to 24 hours, and go away on their own.

Hangovers are more likely or may be more severe if you:

- drink on an empty stomach (so it's a good idea to eat before and while you drink alcohol)
- use other drugs while drinking (smoking nicotine is known to make a hangover worse)
- sleep poorly after drinking (alcohol may worsen your sleep which may in turn worsen your hangover)
- drink dark coloured alcohols, such as brandy, rum or whiskey.

Pacing yourself (aiming to drink one drink or less every hour), and drinking water between alcoholic drinks may reduce the severity of a hangover.

Hangovers usually pass with time, but these tips may help to ease symptoms:

- Sip water or fruit juice to stay hydrated.
- Eat something. Plain or bland foods, such as soup or toast, may be easier on a fragile stomach.
- Take a pain reliever. (A standard dose of an over-the-counter pain reliever such as paracetamol may ease your headache, but aspirin can irritate your stomach.)
- Sleep it off.

If you're regularly experiencing hangovers, or hangovers are affecting your relationships, work or life in general, talk to your doctor. You may need treatment for alcohol misuse or dependence.

Alcohol poisoning emergency

Sometimes heavy drinking results in the much more serious effect of alcohol poisoning. This is a life-threatening emergency. Call 000 for emergency care if you see these signs in someone who has been drinking:

- confusion
- vomiting
- seizures
- slow breathing (less than eight breaths a minute) or irregular breathing (a gap of more than 10 seconds between breaths)

- blue-tinged skin or pale skin
- low body temperature (hypothermia)
- difficulty remaining conscious
- passing out (unconsciousness) and can't be woken.

If someone is unconscious or can't be woken up, they are at risk of dying. If you suspect someone has alcohol poisoning – even if you don't see the signs and symptoms – seek immediate medical attention.

The long-term effects of alcohol

Historically it has been believed that consuming on average more than two standard drinks a day may cause many long-term health problems and other harms, though current research states that no level of alcohol consumption poses reduced risks of chronic disease development.

The World Health Organization (WHO) says alcohol contributes to more than 200 different types of disease and injury.

Some of the most common alcohol-related harms include:

- road and other accidents
- domestic and public violence
- crime
- family breakdown
- social dysfunction
- cardiovascular disease
- cancers, including of the oral cavity, pharynx, larynx, oesophagus, liver, colorectum and female breast
- diabetes
- nutrition-related conditions, such as folate deficiency and malnutrition
- overweight and obesity
- risks to unborn babies
- liver diseases
- mental health conditions, such as anxiety and depression, and interference with antidepressant medication
- alcohol tolerance and alcohol dependence or addiction
- long-term cognitive impairment
- self-harm (suicide).

The WHO reports that in 2012, nearly 6 per cent of all deaths globally were caused by alcohol consumption. Worldwide, more men die as a result of alcohol consumption than women.

In the long term, alcohol consumption can affect all aspects of a person's life: their physical and mental health, work, finances and relationships.

What is binge drinking and how does it affect your body?

Generally, binge drinking means drinking heavily over a short period of time with the intention and result of getting immediately and severely intoxicated (drunk).

In the short term, binge drinking may result in a hangover, alcohol poisoning, or any of the other short-term effects of alcohol consumption, such as accidents and violence, discussed above.

In the long term, binge drinking may result in any of the long-term effects of alcohol consumption, such as heart disease, cancer, liver cirrhosis and diabetes.

How to avoid or reduce the effects of alcohol on your body

The best way to avoid the effects of alcohol on your body is to not drink alcohol. This is especially important if you are trying to get pregnant, or you are pregnant or breastfeeding, as there is no safe level of alcohol use that has been identified.

If you choose to drink alcohol, low level drinking is better for your body than heavy drinking or binge drinking.

Australia's **[national guidelines to reduce health risks from drinking alcohol](#)** from the National Health and Medical Research Council say the lifetime risk of harm from drinking alcohol increases with the amount you drink. For healthy men and women, they advise:

- Drinking no more than two standard drinks on any day reduces the lifetime risk of harm from alcohol-related disease or injury.
- Drinking no more than four standard drinks on a single occasion reduces the risk of alcohol-related injury arising from that occasion.

See the **[guidelines for more advice](#)** on levels of drinking, or read this fact sheet from **[Drug Info](#)**.

If you'd like to cut down on your alcohol consumption, these tips may help.

It's important to monitor your alcohol consumption as part of a healthy diet. Alcohol consumption can cause weight gain and obesity. You may like to **[read some more about alcohol consumption and risks](#)**.

Where to get help

- Your **[GP \(doctor\)](#)**
- **[Drug Info](#)** Tel. **[1300 85 85 84](#)** – information and referral services for anyone seeking help for alcohol or drug use
- **[Family Drug Help](#)** Tel. **[1300 660 068](#)**
- **[Family Drug Support](#)** Tel. **[1300 368 186](#)** (24 hours a day, seven days per week)
- Alcohol and other drug treatment services
- **[DirectLine](#)** Tel. **[1800 888 236](#)** (24 hours a day, seven days per week)
- Your local community health service
- An alcohol or other drug helpline in your state or territory Tel. **[1300 368 186](#)** (national support line, 24/7)

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Alcohol and Drug Foundation

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