
Alcohol explained

Summary

- Alcohol affects different people in different ways.
 - Heavy and binge drinking can cause serious health effects.
 - It is safest not to drink at all while you are pregnant or breastfeeding.
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Alcohol is the most widely used social drug in Australia. It 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 alcohol consumption 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.

The risk of injury and disease increases the more you drink.

There is no safe level of alcohol use in pregnancy, and it is safest not to drink at all when you are breastfeeding. If you plan to drive, it is better not to drink alcohol at all.

Alcohol intake guidelines

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

- adult men and women – drinking no more than two standard alcoholic drinks on any day reduces the risk of harm from alcohol-related disease or injury over a lifetime. Drinking no more than four standard drinks on a single occasion reduces the risk of alcohol-related injury arising from that occasion
- children and young people – the safest choice for young people under 18 years of age is not to drink alcohol 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 (no more than 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.

Any drinking above recommended levels carries a higher risk. Mixing alcohol and other drugs – either illegal drugs or some prescription drugs – can cause serious health problems.

Alcohol content of a standard drink

A standard drink contains 10 g of alcohol. However, the size of a standard drink can vary according to the type of alcohol and even varies between particular brands or labels. Furthermore, the size of a drink served in some hotels, restaurants or at home may be much bigger than a standard drink.

Wine especially varies greatly in alcoholic content, usually between nine and 16 per cent. Understanding how to count standard drinks can help you keep track of how much alcohol you consume.

One standard drink equals:

- 285 ml (one pot/middy/half-pint) of regular beer (4.8 per cent alcohol content)
 - 375 ml (one stubby) of mid-strength beer (3.5 per cent alcohol content)
 - 100 ml (or one small glass) of table wine (approx. 13.5 per cent alcohol content)
 - 30 ml of spirits (approx. 40 per cent alcohol content) plus mixer.
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Cocktails can contain as much alcohol as five or six standard drinks, depending on the recipe.

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 per cent) 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.

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.

Effects of alcohol on your baby's health

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 **fetal 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.

For more information, visit [**Alcohol and pregnancy**](#).

Alcohol and breastfeeding

Alcohol can reduce your supply of breastmilk. It also passes into your breastmilk, and so can be passed on to your baby and may cause damage to their developing brain. If you are breastfeeding you are advised to avoid drinking alcohol.

If you do 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.

The Australian Breastfeeding Association's free **Feed Safe app** can help you to have the occasional drink safely while you are breastfeeding.

Binge drinking alcohol can be dangerous

Binge drinking is the name commonly used to describe drinking heavily over a short period 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. The current 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.

Alcohol and driving

Alcohol can impair coordination and judgement, and is a major cause of road injury in Australia. There is no set number of drinks that you can have to stay under .05 BAC (blood alcohol concentration).

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 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 .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 exactly 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

Remember that you don't always have to drink alcohol, and you can use a range of strategies to monitor and reduce your intake:

- 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.
- Stay within the **recommended guidelines for low-risk drinking** to reduce your risk of an alcohol-related injury or disease.

Where to get help

- Your **GP(doctor)**
- **DrugInfo**. Tel. **1300 85 85 84** – for information
- **DirectLine**. Tel. **1800 888 236** – for counselling and referral
- **Family Drug Help** – for information and support for people concerned about a relative or friend using drugs
Tel. **1300 660 068**

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