
Alcohol facts

Summary

- Alcohol affects people in different ways. The health effects of drinking alcohol can vary depending on age, gender and other risk factors.
 - Heavy and binge drinking can cause serious health effects.
 - The size of a standard drink can vary according to the type of alcohol.
 - It is safest not to drink if you are pregnant or breastfeeding.
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Alcohol is the most widely used social drug in Australia. It is a depressant drug that slows down the messages travelling between the brain and body and can affect people in different ways. The 'riskier' someone's level of drinking is, the more likely it is to cause serious health, personal and social problems. Heavy drinkers, binge drinkers and very young drinkers are particularly at risk.

The health effects of alcohol consumption can vary depending on age, gender and other risk factors. Binge drinking is a 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.

Manage your alcohol intake

Drinking alcohol can increase your risk of alcohol-related illness and injury including:

- **bowel, breast, throat and mouth cancer**
- **liver disease**
- cardiovascular disease (CVD) (such as **heart disease and stroke**)
- **mental health conditions**
- accidents and falls (such as **motor vehicle crashes** and **alcohol poisoning**).

The less you drink, the lower your risk of alcohol-related harm. For some people, not drinking at all is the safest option.

Australia's alcohol guidelines

While there is no safe level of drinking, the following guidelines can help to determine if your alcohol intake is harmful:

- Healthy adult men and women (over 18 years) – no more than 10 standard drinks a week and no more than 4 standard drinks on any one day.
- Children and young people (under 18 years) – should not drink alcohol (there is no 'safe' or 'no-risk' level).
- **Women who are pregnant or planning a pregnancy** – should not drink alcohol to reduce the risk of harm to their unborn baby.
- Women who are breastfeeding – avoiding alcohol is safest for your baby.

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.

What is the alcohol content of a standard drink?

A standard drink contains 10g of alcohol. However, the size of a standard drink can vary according to the type of alcohol. It can also vary between brands or labels.

Sizes of drinks can differ depending on the location too. Some hotels, bars, restaurants or those consumed at homes may be much bigger than a standard drink.

Wine especially can vary considerably in alcoholic content, usually between 9% and 16%. Understanding how to count standard drinks can help you keep track of how much alcohol you are drinking.



Image courtesy of the Alcohol and Drug Foundation, Australia

One standard drink equals:

- 285ml (1 pot/middy/half-pint) of regular beer (4.8% alcohol)
- 375ml (1 stubby) of mid-strength beer (3.5% alcohol)
- 100ml (or 1 small glass) of red table wine (approx.13.5% alcohol)
- 30ml of spirits (approx. 40% alcohol) plus mixer.

Depending on the recipe, some cocktails can contain as much alcohol as four standard drinks.

How the body processes alcohol

Alcohol gets into the bloodstream through the stomach and small intestine. If you have food in your stomach, it will slow down the rate the alcohol is absorbed, but it will not stop you from becoming drunk. Eventually, all the alcohol you have had will reach your 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 1 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

Drinking alcohol can affect the way the body functions, such as:

- Cardiovascular system – raises blood pressure and triglycerides (especially after binge drinking), damage to the heart muscle and stroke.
- Nervous system – affects coordination, self-control, judgement and reaction times. May also cause nerve and brain damage, tremors and **dementia**.
- Mental health – **depression** and increase suicide risk.
- Gastrointestinal system – **stomach inflammation (gastritis)** and bleeding.
- Liver – liver and **pancreatic cancer**, **hepatitis** (inflammation), fatty changes, **cirrhosis** and liver failure.
- Endocrine system – reduced fertility, loss of **libido** and problems controlling blood sugar.
- Malnutrition (alcohol displaces nutrients from your body).
- **Weight gain** which can lead to obesity and increase diabetes risk.
- **Breast cancer** – women who drink alcohol are at a higher risk than women who don't drink.

Drinking alcohol can affect how the brain develops in people under the age of 25. Teenagers under 18 years are particularly at risk.

Effects of alcohol on an unborn baby

Women who drink alcohol during pregnancy can increase their baby's risk of being:

- underweight
- **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, at any stage of pregnancy, is harmful to your unborn baby. For this reason, pregnant women or women who might soon be pregnant are advised to drink no alcohol.

Alcohol and breastfeeding

Alcohol can reduce breastmilk supply. It can also pass to your baby through breastmilk, and may cause damage to their developing brain.

If you are breastfeeding, it is best to avoid drinking alcohol to keep your baby safe. Current evidence suggests there is no 'safe' or 'no-risk' level of alcohol for breastfeeding mothers.

If you choose to drink alcohol, it is best wait up to 2 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.)

Download the Australian Breastfeeding Association's free **Feed Safe app** to help you monitor your drinking while breastfeeding.

Health effects of binge drinking

Binge drinking is commonly used to describe heavy drinking over a short period to get drunk (or intoxicated).

The effects of large amounts of alcohol are immediate and severe and may cause:

- confusion
- blurred vision
- poor muscle control
- nausea and vomiting
- sleep, coma or even death
- impair judgement and ability to make decisions which can increase your likelihood of doing something dangerous.

Although the recent **Australian Guidelines to Reduce Health Risks from Drinking**, talk about drinking too much 'on a single occasion of drinking' rather than 'binge drinking', the harm experienced by 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. For instance, you may drink the same number of drinks on different occasions and have entirely 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, keep your BAC under the legal limit for driving (in Victoria, this is .05 BAC).

Alcohol takes time to leave the body and you may still have alcohol in your body several hours or even the next day. Learner and probationary drivers, and drivers of trucks, buses, trams and trains, must maintain a zero-blood alcohol limit.

It is difficult to determine the exact amount of drinks to stay under the BAC limit. You may get some idea by recording your drinks or testing yourself with a fully calibrated breath testing machine.

Although breath testing machines are available commercially and in venues, they may give an incorrect reading if they are not calibrated properly which can be dangerous.

Also, if you have checked on a breathalyser that you are okay to drive, you may not be. BAC can increase after your last drink, which could push you over the .05 limit while you are on the road.

How to drink responsibly

Remember you don't always have to drink alcohol to have a good time. Use some 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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Alcohol and Drug Foundation

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