

# Alcohol



## DRUG FACTS



### What is alcohol?

Alcohol is a drug that slows down the brain and nervous system. It is the most widely used drug in Australia.

Drinking a small amount is not harmful for most people, but regular drinking of a lot of alcohol can cause health, personal and social problems.

### Effects

What alcohol does to you depends on:

- how much you drink
- how quickly you drink it
- your size and weight
- whether you are male or female
- how good your general health is
- how healthy your liver is
- where you drink
- whether you drink alone
- whether you use alcohol with other drugs.

### Immediate effects

Alcohol slows down the messages sent between the brain and the rest of the body. This can make you:

- relax, feel good
- do or say things you normally wouldn't
- feel dizzy, have bad balance
- have trouble controlling how you move (bad coordination)
- react slowly
- get angry
- vomit

- have blurred vision (not see clearly)
- slur your words (not speak clearly).

Drinking a lot in a short time can cause:

- a hangover
- headaches
- nausea or vomiting
- shakiness
- passing out
- stopping breathing (rare).

Because alcohol affects sight and coordination, drinking often causes accidents – especially car crashes and drownings.

### Long-term effects

Drinking a lot of alcohol regularly over time is likely to cause physical, emotional or social problems. Damage to some body organs can be permanent.

Problems can include:

- poor diet
- stomach problems
- frequent infections
- skin problems
- liver and brain damage
- damage to reproductive organs
- memory loss/confusion
- heart and blood disorders
- depression
- relationship problems
- work problems
- money or legal troubles.

### Mixing alcohol with other drugs

Using alcohol at the same time as any other drug can be dangerous. This includes drinking alcohol while using medicines from the chemist or doctor. One drug can make the negative effects of the other even worse. Alcohol can also stop medicines from working properly.

Mixing alcohol with other drugs that slow down the body (eg sleeping pills, heroin, marijuana) can:

- make it harder to think clearly
- make it harder to properly control how you move
- stop your breathing and cause death.



## Tolerance and dependence

Anyone can develop a 'tolerance' to alcohol. Tolerance means that you must drink more to feel the same effects you used to have with lower amounts.

'Dependence' on alcohol means that it takes up much of your thoughts, emotions and activities. Not all people who drink are dependent. Dependent people find it very difficult to stop or reduce drinking. This is because of withdrawal symptoms, which can include:

- anxiety
- sweating
- shaking
- vomiting
- fits
- hallucinations (seeing or hearing things).

## Women and alcohol

Doctors suggest that women should drink less than men. This is because women's body tissue absorbs a higher concentration of alcohol than men's.

Women often:

- get drunk more quickly than men
- recover from drinking more slowly than men
- go over the legal driving limit more quickly than men.

## Alcohol and pregnancy





Regular drinking of alcohol during pregnancy can cause problems for the mother and the baby. Drinking a lot can lead to losing the baby before it is born or the baby being born with foetal alcohol syndrome (slow growth before and after birth, and mental disabilities). Doctors recommend that pregnant women or women trying to get pregnant should not drink alcohol at all.



## Standard drinks

A 'standard drink' is the measure of alcohol used to work out safe drinking levels.

All the following drinks (common servings in NSW) are different sizes but each has about 10 grams of alcohol. The drinks are different sizes because some are stronger (have more alcohol) than others. Each is one standard drink.

			
<b>light beer</b>	<b>ordinary beer</b>	<b>wine</b>	<b>spirits</b>
1 schooner	1 middy	1 glass	1 nip
425 mL	285 mL	100 mL	30 mL
2.7% alcohol/vol	4.9% alcohol/vol	12% alcohol/vol	40% alcohol/vol

## Guidelines for low-risk drinking

Consuming alcohol at the risk levels shown in the table below, is not recommended for people who:

- have a condition made worse by drinking
- are on medication
- are under 18 years of age
- are pregnant
- are about to engage in activities involving risk or a degree of skill (eg driving, flying, water sports, skiing, operating machinery).

### Risk of harm in the SHORT term

	Standard drinks on any one day		
	low risk	risky	high risk
<b>MALES</b> on an average day	Up to 6, no more than 3 days per week	7 to 10	11 or more
<b>FEMALES</b> on an average day	Up to 4, no more than 3 days per week	5 to 6	7 or more



## Risk of harm in the LONG term

	low risk	risky	high risk
average number of standard drinks			
<b>MALES</b> on an average day	up to 4 per day	5 to 6 per day	7 or more per day
overall weekly	up to 28	29 to 42	43 or more
<b>FEMALES</b> on an average day	up to 2 per day	3 to 4 per day	7 or more per day
overall weekly	up to 14	15 to 28	29 or more

*(Australian Alcohol Guidelines: Health Risks and Benefits, National Health and Medical Research Council, Canberra 2001)*

## Heavy episodic drinking

Heavy episodic drinking (often referred to as 'binge drinking') can refer to either occasional bouts of heavy drinking by young and/or non-dependent people, or a 'bender' had by an alcohol-dependent person, which may last for days or weeks. Studies have shown an increased likelihood of acute harm such as accident and injury, when drinking in this manner.



## Sobering up

Sobering up, or getting the alcohol out of your body, takes time. A little bit of the alcohol (about 10%) leaves the body in breath, sweat and urine, but most is broken down by the liver.

The liver can only get rid of about one standard drink per hour. Nothing can speed this up – not even black coffee, cold showers, exercise or vomiting.

You can still be over the legal limit even a few hours after your last drink, even if you feel okay.

## Blood alcohol concentration

Blood alcohol concentration (BAC) means how much alcohol is in a person's blood. A 'breathalyser test' measures the amount of alcohol in a person's breath, and gives an idea of BAC. The test gives a number, such as .05. A person with a BAC level of .05 has more alcohol in their blood than someone with a level of .02. BAC is determined by how much a person drinks and how long they take to drink it.



## Alcohol and driving

Alcohol is involved in around one-third of all road deaths. There are laws to limit the amount a person can drink before driving.

In Australia, the legal limit for drinking and driving for most people is .05 BAC.

In NSW the limit is zero for:

- L- and P-plate drivers
- drivers under 25, for their first three years of driving (if starting with P-plates)
- drivers of heavy vehicles (like trucks), public passenger vehicles (like buses) and dangerous goods vehicles (like trucks carrying chemicals).

It is difficult to work out how many drinks will put a person over the legal drink-driving limit. Some people will reach a higher BAC more quickly, including:

- women
- people who are not healthy
- people with an empty stomach
- people with smaller bodies
- overweight people.

If your legal limit is .05, a good guide to keep within your limit is:

- **Men** – two standard drinks in the first hour and then one per hour after that.
- **Women** – one standard drink in the first hour and then one per hour after that.



If you drink more than this and drive, then you are breaking the law and could lose your licence, get a fine or go to prison. Any drink-driver who injures or kills someone can be sent to prison.

## Alcohol and the law

It is illegal to sell alcohol to – or get alcohol for – anyone under 18.

It is also illegal to sell alcohol to someone who is already drunk.

It is an offence to drink or carry alcohol in an alcohol-free zone.

## Information and advice

### Self-help associations

#### Alcoholics Anonymous (AA)

A self help organisation for people with alcohol problems. Phone the General Service Office of Alcoholics Anonymous

Tel. (02) 9663 1206 for the nearest local AA in your state.

#### AI-Anon

A self help organisation for family, relatives and friends of people with alcohol problems.

Phone the General Service Office of AI-Anon  
Tel. (03) 9629 8327 (Monday–Wednesday) for the nearest local AI-Anon in your state.



### 24 hour confidential telephone counseling service

#### NSW

Alcohol and Drug Information Service (ADIS)

Tel. (02) 9361 8000

*Toll free.* 1800 422 599

#### Victoria

Direct Line

Tel. (03) 9416 1818

*Toll free.* 1800 888 236

#### Western Australia

Alcohol and Drug Information Service (ADIS)

Tel. (08) 9442 5000

*Toll free.* 1800 198 024

#### Queensland

Alcohol and Drug Information Service (ADIS)

Tel. (07) 3236 2414

*Toll free.* 1800 177 833

#### South Australia

Alcohol and Drug Information Service (ADIS)

Tel. (08) 8363 8618

*Toll free.* 1300 131 340

#### Northern Territory

Amity Community Service

Tel. (08) 8981 8030

*Toll free.* 1800 629 683

Alcohol and Drug Information Service (ADIS)

*Toll free.* 1800 131 350

#### Tasmania

Alcohol and Drug Information Service

Tel. (03) 9416 1818

*Toll free.* 1800 811 994

#### ACT

Alcohol and Drug Program

Tel. (02) 6205 4545

**Note.** Toll free numbers are only available if you are calling from within that state.

The information in this document can be accessed through the NSW Health website: [www.health.nsw.gov.au](http://www.health.nsw.gov.au)

Further copies are available from the Better Health Centre

Tel. (02) 9816 0452 TTY. (02) 9391 9900

Other publications in this series include Marijuana, Cocaine, Benzodiazepines, Heroin, Ecstasy, Hallucinogens and Speed.

© NSW Department of Health 2003

Updated July 2006

SHPN (DPB) 030077