

# Alcohol



## 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 regularly drinking 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
- if there is a family history of alcohol dependence.

## 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 judgement, sight and coordination, drinking often causes accidents – especially car crashes and drowning.

## 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:

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

## 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
- depression
- hallucinations (seeing or hearing things).

## Alcohol and pregnancy

The safest option for a pregnant or breastfeeding mother is to not drink alcohol. Regular drinking of alcohol during pregnancy or whilst breastfeeding can cause problems for the mother (including bleeding, miscarriage and premature birth) and the baby (including disrupted feeding and sleeping patterns and delayed psychomotor development).

Drinking a lot can lead to losing the baby before it is born or the baby being born with Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) (slow growth before and after birth and mental, behavioural and learning disabilities).



The Australian Alcohol Guidelines recommend that women trying to get pregnant do not drink alcohol.

## Australian 'standard' drinks

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

A standard drink in Australia contains 10g of alcohol. A serving of alcohol in a pub or club can often be larger than a 'standard' drink, for example a standard glass of wine is 100mL but a typical serve may be 150mL.

In Australia, all bottles, cans and casks containing alcoholic beverages are required by law to state on the label the approximate number of standard drinks they contain.

Following are some examples of a standard drink:

<b>spirits</b>	1 nip	30 mL	40% alcohol/vol
<b>beer</b>	can/stubbie low strength beer = 0.8 standard drink	can/stubbie mid-strength beer = 1 standard drink	can/stubbie full strength beer = 1.4 standard drinks
<b>wine</b>	1 glass	11.5% alcohol/vol	100 mL

## Guidelines for reducing health risks from drinking alcohol

The Australian Alcohol Guidelines (2009), developed by the National Health and Medical Research Council, are designed to communicate the risks of alcohol consumption and to allow individuals to make informed decisions regarding the amount of alcohol that they choose to drink. For both men and women, to reduce the lifetime risk of death from alcohol-related disease or injury to less than 1 person in 100 then:

- If you drink regularly, to stay healthy, drink no more than two standard drinks each day.
- On any single occasion, to stay healthy, drink no more than four standard drinks.
- Young people under 18 years of age should not drink alcohol.
- The safest option for a pregnant or breastfeeding mother is not to drink alcohol.

Drinking less frequently, eg drinking weekly rather than daily, and drinking less on each occasion, reduces the lifetime risk of alcohol-related harm.

For more information on the guidelines go to <http://www.nhmrc.gov.au>



## Heavy episodic drinking



Heavy episodic drinking (often referred to as binge drinking) can refer to either occasional bouts of heavy drinking by 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)

And 0.02 for:

- drivers of vehicles of "gross vehicle mass" greater than 13.9 tonnes.
- drivers of vehicles carrying dangerous goods.
- drivers of public vehicles such as taxi or bus drivers.

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 you drink and drive over your legal drink-driving limit, 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

### Al-Anon

A self help organisation for family, relatives and friends of people with alcohol problems. Phone the General Service Office of Al-Anon Tel. (03) 9620 2116 (Monday–Thursday) for the nearest local Al-Anon in your state.

### 24 hour confidential telephone counselling 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) 3837 5989  
\*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) 8944 6565  
\*Toll free. 1800 684 372

Alcohol and Drug Information Service (ADIS)  
\*Toll free. 1800 131 350

## 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) 9599 8866 for the nearest local AA in your state.



### Tasmania

Alcohol and Drug Information Service  
\*Toll free. 1800 888 236

### ACT

Alcohol and Drug Program  
Tel. (02) 6207 9977

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

You will find a copy of this sheet at:  
[www.communitybuilders.nsw.gov.au/drugs\\_action/factsheets\\_index.html](http://www.communitybuilders.nsw.gov.au/drugs_action/factsheets_index.html)

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.

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