Alcohol - Factsheet

Most Australians enjoy drinking alcohol socially and many drink at a level that doesn’t have a negative effect on their health.

There is some evidence that low level alcohol drinking may actually have a small positive effect on health and slightly reduce the risk of some cardiovascular and cerebrovascular disease. However, this positive effect of drinking alcohol is often overestimated or overstated, and generally relates to middle aged or older people and low level drinking only – i.e., about ½ a standard alcoholic drink per day.

It is recommended that anyone who drinks alcohol adheres to the National Health and Medical Research Council’s 2009 Australian Guidelines to Reduce Health Risks from Drinking Alcohol.

The Effects of Alcohol

A substantial proportion of people drink at levels higher than that recommended by the 2009 Australian Guidelines to Reduce Health Risks from Drinking Alcohol. Drinking alcohol at this level increases the risk of alcohol related harm and negative health effects.

Short Term Effects

Alcohol is a central nervous system depressant and so the most obvious and short term effects of drinking alcohol include feelings of relaxation, well being and a loss of inhibitions. However, as more alcohol is consumed these effects turn into negative effects such as drowsiness, loss of balance, nausea and vomiting. The effects of higher alcohol intakes can be serious and lead to life threatening events such as unconsciousness and inhibition of normal breathing. Alcohol consumption is also a major factor in many accidents, injuries and incidents of violence.

The effects and harm that alcohol can have varies depending on a range of individual factors and the interaction between them. These factors include: gender, body size and composition, age, experience of drinking alcohol, individual metabolism and social factors. However, no level of drinking alcohol can be guaranteed to be completely safe or ‘no risk’, and high level alcohol consumption definitely has some or many negative short term and longer term effects on everyone.

Long Term Effects

Longer term or cumulative effects of alcohol are numerous and varied. They include:

Cardiovascular Disease - high blood pressure, arrhythmias, shortness of breath, some types of cardiac failure, stroke and other circulatory problems.

Cancer – oral, pharynx, larynx, oesophagus, liver, colorectum and breast cancers.

Diabetes – possible negative effects on insulin sensitivity and a contributor to unhealthy weight gain.

Overweight and Obesity – Every gram of alcohol contains 29kJ, adding significant extra kilojoules to any diet.
Nutrition-related conditions/deficiencies – e.g. malnutrition, Wernicke-Korsakoff syndrome (thiamine deficiency), folate deficiency, Vitamin A depletion and pellagra (Vitamin B3 deficiency).

Liver Disease – cirrhosis of the liver.

Mental Health Conditions – increases risk of depression and anxiety, may also affect the efficacy of antidepressant medication.

Cognitive Impairment – contributes to negative structural and metabolic brain changes, increases risk of dementia.

Self Harm – risk factor for self harm and suicide.

The National Health and Medical Research Council’s 2009 Australian Guidelines to Reduce Health Risks from Drinking Alcohol:

For Men and Women

- No more than 2 standard drinks a day on any day reduces the lifetime risk of harm from alcohol related disease or injury.
- No more than 4 standard drinks on a single occasion reduces the risk of alcohol related injury arising from that occasion
- 2 alcohol free days per week

For Young People

- Children under 15 years of age are at the greatest risk of harm from drinking alcohol and should not drink at all.
- Young people aged 15-17 years of age are at risk of harm from drinking alcohol and starting to drink alcohol should be delayed as long as possible. Not drinking is the safest option.
- Young adults aged 18-25 years of age are at risk of harm from drinking alcohol. Not drinking is the safest option. If alcohol is consumed it should be in small quantities only (as per the guidelines for adult men and women or less) and spread over several hours.

Pregnant Women or Women Planning Pregnancy or Women who are Breastfeeding

- Not drinking alcohol is the safest option.

Other People/Situations

There’s a range of other people or circumstances under which not drinking alcohol is the safest option. These include where people are:

- supervising children,
- driving or operating machinery,
- engaged in water or snow activities,
- taking certain medications or other drugs,
- affected by physical or mental health problems,
- affected by a history of alcoholism.
A standard drink is a drink that contains 10 grams of alcohol. This illustration shows the number of standard drinks in some popular drinks. It is easy to see that many popular drinks contain a lot more than one standard drink per serve – e.g., per glass, bottle or can.
Tips for Reducing Alcohol Consumption

- Plan your alcohol consumption each time you plan to drink. Decide how much you are going to have before you start drinking.
- Make yourself accountable to your partner or friend for how many drinks you are going to have and when you are going to stop drinking.
- Eat a snack or drink water before you start drinking so that your stomach is not empty, and only drink with meals.
- Alternate alcoholic drinks with non-alcoholic drinks like plain mineral water.
- Drink slowly. Enjoy each glass and make it last longer.
- Avoid getting in “shouts” or drinking competitions.
- If drinking by yourself don’t exceed the guideline of 2 standard drinks. If drinking wine, re-cork the bottle.

Reference: National Health and Medical Research Council’s 2009 Australian Guidelines to Reduce Health Risks from Drinking Alcohol