

Fact Sheet

Guidelines for low-risk drinking

Introduction

Alcohol is the most widely used legal drug in Australian society. It is so widely used, that many people don't think of it as a drug, and may not realise that it can be very harmful. In fact, alcohol is a significant cause of injury and ill health, violence, crime, family breakdown, road accidents, loss of productivity in workplaces and death in Australia.

Most people seem to understand how much alcohol they can drink to remain under the legal limits for driving, but many people are confused about how much alcohol they can drink before it could be harmful to their health and wellbeing.

While there is no safe level of drinking, the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) has developed a set of guidelines to help people make informed decisions about their drinking and the risks to their health. This fact sheet provides an overview of the NHMRC's Australian guidelines.

What do we mean by...

Risk: the probability that an unwanted event (such as a car accident, injury or illness) will occur.

Harm: unwanted effects, such as injury and disease, from drinking alcohol. For example:

- › Immediate and short-term harms related to an actual drinking occasion may include hangovers, headaches, nausea, shakiness, vomiting, memory loss, falls and injury, assaults, car accidents, unplanned pregnancy, and accidental death.
- › Long-term harms associated with drinking patterns over time can include cancer, cirrhosis of the liver, brain damage, memory loss and sexual dysfunction.

Other potential harms can include damage to relationships, problems at work or school and legal and financial difficulties.

Standard drink: any drink that contains approximately 10 grams of alcohol (12.5ml of pure alcohol).

Different types of alcoholic drinks contain different amounts of alcohol. Each of these drinks equals approximately one standard drink:

- › A 285ml pot of full strength beer (4.8% alc./vol)
- › A 375ml stubbie/can of mid-strength beer (3.5% alc./vol)
- › 100ml of wine or sparkling wine (12.0% alc./vol)
- › A 30ml 'shot' or 'nip' of spirits (40.0% alc./vol)
- › 2/3 of a 275ml bottle/can of ready-to-drink spirits/wine (7.0% alc./vol).

The guidelines

NHMRC's guidelines only provide a general guide. Everyone's situation is different and there are some situations where the harms are greater and not drinking is the safest option. Some of these are outlined in the following sections, however, talk to a health professional for more information if you have any concerns.

Remember, there is no safe level of drinking.

Guideline 1: Reducing the risk of alcohol-related harm over a lifetime

The more alcohol a person drinks the greater their risk of developing an alcohol-related injury or disease during their lifetime.

Healthy men and women should drink no more than two standard drinks on any day.

- › If this guideline is followed, the lifetime risk of death from an alcohol-related injury or disease is less than one in 100. Every drink above this level increases the risk and drinking less on each occasion reduces this risk.
- › If drinking less than two drinks a day, there is little difference between men and women of a higher risk of an alcohol-related injury or disease.

Guideline 2: Reducing the risk of injury on a single occasion of drinking

The more alcohol a person drinks on a single occasion, the greater the risk of an immediate alcohol-related injury.

Healthy men and women should drink no more than four standard drinks on any one occasion.

- › Drinking four standard drinks on a single occasion more than doubles the relative risk of injury in the following six hours and this risk increases rapidly with each additional drink.
- › While women will generally require less alcohol than men to reach a prescribed blood alcohol level, men's behaviour when drinking is generally more risky.
- › Each drinking occasion also contributes to the risk of an alcohol-related injury or disease over the lifetime (guideline 1).

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Guideline 3: Children and young people under 18 years of age

For children and young people under 18 years of age, not drinking is the safest option.

- › Dangerous behaviour is more likely among young people when they drink compared to older drinkers. Young people are more likely to drink more and take risks.
- › The brain is still developing during the teenage years and drinking alcohol during this time may damage the brain and lead to health complications later in life.
- › The earlier a child is introduced to alcohol the more likely they are to develop problems with it later in life. Young people should therefore delay their first drink for as long as possible.

Guideline 4: Pregnancy and breastfeeding

For women who are pregnant, are planning a pregnancy, or are breastfeeding, not drinking is the safest option.

- › Drinking while pregnant can cause problems such as bleeding, miscarriage, stillbirth and premature birth.
- › When a pregnant woman drinks, the alcohol travels through the placenta to the unborn baby. This can affect the development of the baby including causing slowed growth and a range of physical, mental, behavioural and learning disabilities that come under the Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) umbrella.
- › Alcohol reduces a mother's milk supply and also passes through the blood stream into breast milk. This may affect the baby's feeding and sleeping patterns, as well as its psychomotor development.

Other issues to consider

The guidelines outlined in this fact sheet provide a general guide, however, there are many other factors that can affect the risk of alcohol-related harm and should be considered when making decisions about drinking. For example:

Not drinking is the safest option when:

- › involved in, or supervising, risky activities such as driving, operating machinery or water sports
- › supervising children.

Some people should get advice from their health professional about drinking. For example:

- › anyone taking any medicines, including prescription or over-the-counter medicines
- › people with alcohol-related, or other physical conditions, that can be affected by alcohol
- › people with mental health issues.

Some groups may have an increased risk of harm if they drink alcohol. For example:

- › young people (0–18 years)
- › older people (60 years and older)
- › people with a family history of alcohol dependence
- › people who use drugs illicitly.

More information

NHMRC guidelines: www.alcohol.gov.au

If you are worried about the amount you are drinking, and would like help to cut down see your family doctor or contact the alcohol and other drug service in your state or territory. Visit druginfo.adf.org.au for contact details.



druginfo.adf.org.au



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