



ALCOHOL: THE FACTS

Alcohol is the most widely used drug in Australia and its misuse continues to cause significant harm and enormous cost to the community.

The World Health Organization (WHO) finds that alcohol is the third most important avoidable cause of death and disability in developed societies like Australia. Given this finding, alcohol is not an ordinary commodity, and should not be treated as one. Alcohol is a drug too.

Alcohol is deeply entrenched in Australian society and a seemingly constant companion whenever individuals choose to celebrate, commiserate, relax and/or socialise. Alcohol is considered an intrinsic part of our social fabric and many people admit that there is gentle pressure to drink and that choosing not to drink can be confronting for those who do drink.

The dangers and damaging effects of alcohol need to be more widely discussed in an attempt to minimise the significantly damaging impact it places on the community. Alcohol alone is estimated to cause \$15.3 billion worth of harm annually to the Australian economy.

WHAT ARE THE PROBLEMS WITH DRINKING ALCOHOL?

Drinking in excess of recommended levels can have harmful effects on the drinker's health. These risks include short-term risks such as injury, violence, and accidental death, and long-term risks such as cancer, cirrhosis of the liver, brain damage, memory loss, and sexual dysfunction.

There are many social and personal problems that can be related to drinking at risky or high-risk levels, including family or relationship problems, problems at work or school, legal and financial problems.

LOW-RISK DRINKING GUIDELINES

The National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) issued revised and simplified Alcohol Guidelines on 6 March, 2009:

Guideline 1

For healthy men and women, drinking no more than two (2) standard drinks on any day reduces the lifetime risk of harm from alcohol-related disease or injury.

Guideline 2

For healthy men and women, drinking no more than four (4) standard drinks on a single occasion reduces the risk of alcohol-related injury arising from that occasion.

Guideline 3

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

Guideline 3A – Children under 15 years of age are at greatest risk of harm from drinking, for this age group, not drinking is especially important.

Guideline 3B – For young people aged 15-17 the safest option is to delay drinking as long as possible.

Guideline 4

Maternal alcohol consumption can harm the developing fetus or breastfeeding baby.

Guideline 4A – For women who are pregnant or planning a pregnancy, not drinking is the safest option.

Guideline 4B – For women who are breastfeeding, not drinking is the safest option.

YOUNG ADULTS AGED 18–25 YEARS

According to the statistics, young adults are at the highest risk of alcohol-related injury. Evidence is growing that drinking alcohol between the ages of 18-25 can impair brain development and lead to alcohol-related problems throughout life. Young adults are especially urged not to drink beyond the guidelines for men and women. In addition, when choosing to drink people should be aware of the risks of:

- participating in potentially risky activities such as swimming, diving, or boating
- mixing alcohol with mood-altering drugs; and
- driving or operating heavy machinery

ADDRESSING THE ISSUE

There are a number of successful, cost-effective, and efficient ways to address alcohol dependence, up-take, and misuse. However, the level of funding committed to reducing alcohol-related harms is clearly insufficient when considered in the context of the harms and costs alcohol misuse causes the community.

THE FIGURES ARE OUT

- The proportion of people drinking at a risk or high risk levels increased from 8.2% in 1995 to 10.3% in 2007
- Each year, 3000 Australians die and some 10 000 need ongoing medical treatment for alcohol-related harm.
- The annual cost in alcohol-related absenteeism is 7.5 million working days and the economic impact of its abuse is \$15.3 billion
- Disturbingly, excessive alcohol consumption contributes to one third of all road deaths; half of all domestic, physical and sexual violence; and 80% of night-time assaults; and
- Binge drinking is highly prevalent among teenagers and young adults, with alcohol being responsible for the deaths of more young people under 35 than any other drug.

HOW MUCH ARE YOU REALLY DRINKING?

It can be difficult to work out if your drink is a standard drink because glass sizes may vary between venues, and different types of drinks contain varying proportions of alcohol per volume.

It can also be difficult to keep track of your drinking when containers such as jugs and casks are being shared, when glasses are being topped up before they are empty and when drinks are mixed with unknown quantities of alcohol, such as in cocktails and alcoholic punches.

The NHMRC Alcohol Guidelines use the idea of a standard drink to help people keep track of how much they drink.

WHAT IS A STANDARD DRINK?

A standard drink is any drink that contains approximately 10 grams of alcohol.

The label on each alcoholic beverage contains information on how many standard drinks are inside the bottle, can or container.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

The Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing
<http://www.alcohol.gov.au/>

Reproduced with approval from the Australian Drug Foundation
© Australian Drug Foundation 2010



Australian Government
Department of Health and Ageing

