



BINGE DRINKING: THE FACTS

Drinking alcohol is the most common type of drug use in Australia. Alcohol 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. As a result, they may drink too heavily at times, or binge drink.

Binge drinking is commonly thought of as drinking heavily over a short period of time with the intention of becoming intoxicated, resulting in immediate and severe intoxication.

IS BINGE DRINKING HARMFUL?

Yes, binge drinking can be harmful in a number of ways:

- **Short-term harms** are those that are immediately harmful to your health. For example, hangovers, headaches, nausea, shakiness and possibly vomiting and memory loss.
- Alcohol's psychoactive effects can change the way you behave. This leads to increased risk of falls, assaults, car accidents, unplanned pregnancy, shame and embarrassment about your behaviour, loss of valuable items such as a damaged car or lost phone, and financial losses through reckless spending while intoxicated, or loss of income through time off work.
- **Long-term harms** include becoming physically or psychologically dependent upon alcohol, additionally, long-term drinking is shown to increase the risk of cancer, brain, kidney and liver damage.

HOW BIG A PROBLEM IS IT REALLY?

Of Australia's general population in 2007, almost 10 per cent of people over 14 drank at levels that increased their risk of alcohol related harm in the long-term risk and 26.8 per cent drank at levels that increased their risk of alcohol-related harm in the short term at least monthly. These figures will likely increase as a result of the new Alcohol Guidelines issued by the National Health and Medical Research Council on 6 March 2009.

Research shows that although the number of 12 to 17 year olds who are drinking alcohol has remained fairly stable during the past decade, the number of those who are drinking at harmful levels has increased significantly during that time. Among 16–24 year olds, alcohol-related harm is one of the leading causes of disease and injury burden.

HOW CAN I AVOID THE RISKS OF BINGE DRINKING?

The National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) *Australian alcohol guidelines for low-risk drinking* recommend:

1. for low-risk from both immediate and long term harm from drinking, men and women should drink two (2) standard drinks, or less, in any one day
2. to reduce the chance of alcohol-related injury, healthy men and women should not drink more than four (4) drinks in any one session
3. for children and young people under 18 years of age, parents and carers are advised that not drinking is the safest option for children and adolescents; and
4. for women who are pregnant, are planning a pregnancy, or are breastfeeding, not drinking is the safest option.

WHAT IS A STANDARD DRINK?

A standard drink is defined as one that contains 10 grams of pure alcohol. Different types of alcoholic drinks contain different amounts of pure alcohol.

Each of these drinks equals approximately **one standard drink**:

- a 285 ml pot/middy/handle of regular beer (4.8% alcohol)
- 2/3 of a 375 ml stubbie of regular beer (4.8% alcohol)
- a 375 ml can of mid-strength beer (3.5% alcohol)
- 1¼ of a 375 ml stubbie of light beer (2.7% alcohol)
- 100 ml of wine or sparkling wine (12.0% alcohol)
- a 30 ml “nip” of spirits (40.0% alcohol)
- 2/3 of a 275 ml can of ready-to-drink spirits (7.0% alcohol); and
- 2/3 of a 375 ml bottle of alcoholic cider (5.5% alcohol).

Keep in mind that not all drinks contain the same concentration of alcohol, and that many venues fail to adhere to standard drink guidelines. Studies have shown that the average serve of wine in a restaurant is equal to approximately 1.8 standard drinks. Beware of bigger glasses, bottles or cans which hold more than one standard drink. If you are not sure, check for standard drinks information on the bottle's label.

SOME TIPS FOR CONTROLLING YOUR DRINKING

Be aware of how alcohol affects you as an individual. If you know you will be drinking alcohol, make sure you plan ahead.

STAYING SAFE

- If you are partying with a group of friends, try to agree that one of the group will not drink, and will be responsible for driving, and looking out for the group generally. Of course each person is ultimately responsible for their own behaviour.
- Make sure you can call a member of your family or a friend if you need help.

REDUCING YOUR DRINKING

- **Set limits for yourself, and stick to them.** Don't let other people pressure you into drinking more than you want.
- **Quench your thirst first.** Have a non-alcoholic drink first if you are thirsty.
- **Drink slowly.** Take sips, not gulps.
- **Drink from a small glass.** Some wine glasses can hold several standard drinks.

- **Be aware of exactly what you are drinking.** Remember that “alcopops” (sweet flavoured pre-mixed drinks) can be quite strong, even though they don't taste like strong alcohol.
- **Try a low alcohol/non-alcoholic alternative.**
- **Eat before and while drinking,** but avoid salty snacks, which will make you thirsty.
- **Avoid getting into a “round” or a “shout”.** They are sure to make you drink faster, and drink more, so that you can keep up with your friends.
- **Avoid “top ups”.** Drink one drink at a time so that you can keep track of how much you are drinking.
- **Stay busy.** Don't just sit and drink. Dancing, playing music or games can take the focus away from drinking.

MORE INFORMATION

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

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