

Number 1.27 revised June 2009
For general audience

Australian 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 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 can be considered to 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 information about the NHMRC's *Australian guidelines to reduce health risks from drinking alcohol*.

What do we mean by...

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

Risk can be calculated in different ways:

- **Lifetime risk:** the accumulated (built up) risk from drinking over a person's lifetime.
- **Relative risk:** the risk of harm in a person who drinks when compared to a person who does not drink.
- **Absolute risk:** the actual risk of harm from drinking.

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, risk of 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 (see fact sheet 'What is a standard drink?').

The guidelines

While there is no safe level of drinking, the *Australian guidelines to reduce health risks from drinking alcohol* provide a general guide for people to reduce the risk of harms.

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.

For healthy men and women to reduce the risk of an alcohol-related injury or disease during their lifetime, they 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 1 in 100. Every drink above this level increases this risk and drinking less on each occasion reduces this risk.
- At lower levels of drinking there is little difference between the risk of an alcohol-related injury or disease during the lifetime of men and women. However, at higher levels of drinking the risk increases more quickly for women than men.

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 arising from that occasion.

For healthy men and women to reduce the risk of an immediate alcohol-related injury, they should drink no more than four standard drinks on any one occasion.

- › Each drinking occasion also contributes to the risk of an alcohol-related injury or disease over the lifetime (Guideline 1).
- › 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.

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.

- › During adolescence the brain continues to develop and undergoes many changes. Drinking alcohol may affect brain development and can lead to alcohol-related harms later in life.

Parents and carers are advised that young people under the age of 15 are at greatest risk of harm from drinking and it is especially important that they do not drink alcohol.

- › Dangerous and antisocial behaviour is more likely among people under 15 years of age when they drink than older drinkers.

Young people aged 15–17 years should delay their first drink for as long as possible.

- › Starting to drink at a young age may increase the likelihood of drinking more, and more often, during adolescence, which could lead to alcohol-related harms later in life.

If young people aged 15–17 years choose to drink they should be in a safe environment, supervised by adults and stay within the guidelines (guidelines 1 and 2).

- › Dangerous behaviour is more likely among 15–17 year olds when they drink than older drinkers.

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 crosses the placenta to the unborn baby. This can affect the development of the baby. This can include slowed growth and a range of physical, mental, behavioural and learning disabilities that are grouped under the term Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD).
- › Alcohol reduces a mother's milk supply and also passes through the blood stream into breastmilk. 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 adults (18–25 years)
 - older people (60 years and older)
 - people with a family history of alcohol dependence
 - people who use drugs illicitly.

People should also consider how their drinking may affect others.

More information

- › For more information about the Australian guidelines to reduce health risks from drinking alcohol visit www.alcohol.gov.au.
- › For more information on drugs and drug prevention contact the DrugInfo Clearinghouse on tel. 1300 85 85 84, email druginfo@adf.org.au.

More information

For more information on drugs and drug prevention contact the DrugInfo Clearinghouse on tel. 1300 8585 84, email druginfo@adf.org.au, or see our website www.druginfo.adf.org.au