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# THE FACTS

Binge Drinking &  
Alcohol Abuse

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“Many of the dangers of alcohol for those who drink and those around them, are misunderstood, tolerated, or ignored.” National Alcohol Strategy 2006-2009.



# Just a drink or two?

People have always had the occasional drink, but it seems that in recent years, particularly amongst young people, getting drunk has become the accepted way to socialise. For both the individuals concerned and the community, this is a worrying trend that needs to be addressed. Many parents are surprised to learn that in most drug-related deaths of young people, the drug involved isn't an illegal drug – it is alcohol. The fact that it's available everywhere and widely advertised in the media as the source of having a good time helps to disguise the fact that alcohol is also a drug with potential to cause harm.<sup>1</sup>

Alcohol is one of the most widely used drugs in Australia. At least one in ten Australians can be classified as binge drinkers, and 6%

of all adult Australians abuse alcohol or are dependent on it.<sup>2</sup> About one in every four people are 'problem drinkers', meaning they drink more than the recommended limits.<sup>3</sup>

It is well documented that drinking too much can lead to serious social and economic problems. Mental and physical health, relationships and even work can be compromised by alcohol, and often the effects of drink remain unchecked until a serious addiction develops.

This booklet is designed to help everyone in our society understand exactly what alcohol is, the dramatic effects of excessive consumption and how we can keep ourselves and our families safe and healthy.

## What is alcohol?

Alcohol is a drug that acts as a depressant and affects every organ in our body. It does not stimulate our brains, as is commonly thought, but actually slows down the central nervous system, including the brain.<sup>4</sup>

It is made of ethyl alcohol (ethanol), a clear colourless substance that can be produced synthetically or naturally by fermenting fruits, vegetables or grains.

After drinking, alcohol is absorbed into the bloodstream from the stomach, and moves to the liver, where it is broken down into acetaldehyde, which is a poison that in strong enough doses, can damage the brain.<sup>5</sup> However the liver can only metabolize a small amount of alcohol at a time, leaving the excess alcohol to circulate throughout the body. How badly a person is affected by alcohol is directly related to the amount consumed.<sup>6</sup>

# What is a hangover?

A 'hangover' is the name given to the symptoms of acetaldehyde poisoning. It's our body's way of warning us of the damage being caused by drinking too much.<sup>7</sup> How healthy you are when you drink relates to the severity of the hangover.<sup>8</sup>

There are two types of hangover, and the first is actually withdrawal. People who drink a lot become tolerant to alcohol and symptoms occur when this amount is withdrawn. These symptoms include

tremors, irritability, anxiety and heightened sensitivity to light, noise and pain. In severe cases, hallucinations, delirium and even convulsions may occur.<sup>9</sup>

The other is the old fashioned hangover, where symptoms (such as headache and vomiting) typically emerge when our blood alcohol level starts to drop. The symptoms usually ease within a day, provided we stop drinking.<sup>10</sup>

“I wish we had paid more attention to how much he was drinking. My husband might still be alive.”



# What is binge drinking?

Binge drinking – also known as ‘getting smashed’ or ‘off your face’ – can be defined in two ways. Firstly, as having six or more drinks in a row;<sup>11</sup> or secondly, as drinking large amounts every now and then and ‘losing control’.<sup>12</sup>

There are two kinds of binge drinking – drinking a lot over a few hours, or drinking over several days or weeks. The second type is more harmful to the body and is often a repeated behaviour.<sup>13</sup>

Binge drinking can lead to death, permanent brain damage, alcohol poisoning, violence, sexual assault, road and other accidents such as drowning.<sup>14</sup>

Although binge drinking affects people of all ages, studies indicate that binge drinking is on the increase amongst young people<sup>15</sup> with one in six young people having more than 20 drinks a day at least once a month.

## The rise of ‘alcopops’

The rise of alcopops, designer drinks or pre-packaged mixed drinks (such as bourbon and cola) seem to be linked to the rise in binge drinking amongst teenagers.<sup>16</sup> In fact, alcopops or RTDs (ready to drink mixers) have been found to be the most common first drink for teenagers. Researchers conclude that the target market for alcopops is the 13-16 age group. This is because alcopops are often packaged to appear similar to branded fizzy drinks, and are affordable for young people because they are cheap to purchase individually. Alcopops are particularly hazardous because some pre-mixed drinks may contain up to three standard drinks of alcohol, a fact that many young people and their parents may be unaware of.<sup>17</sup>





## Alcohol abuse defined

Alcohol abuse is a pattern of drinking that may harm a person's health, relationships or work. People who abuse alcohol may not be dependent on it in the same way as alcoholics, but by drinking too much often and regularly, they may create situations that

can be dangerous for themselves and those around them, such as drink driving. In any case, abuse of alcohol will cause serious damage to health, as described in this booklet. Ultimately, alcohol abuse may lead to alcohol dependency or alcoholism.<sup>18</sup>

## Alcohol abuse and young people

Many young people and their parents do not realise the risks alcohol poses. Studies show that alcohol use by youth and young adults increases the risk of both fatal and nonfatal injuries.<sup>19</sup> It is not surprising, then, that in Australia the drug which is responsible for most motor vehicle accidents involving 17 to 24-year-olds is alcohol.<sup>20</sup>

US research has also shown that you are four times more likely to become an alcoholic if you use alcohol before age 15, when compared with people who begin to drink at 21.<sup>21</sup>

Young people who drink may also be more likely to engage in risky sexual behaviours, do

badly at school and have an increased risk of suicide and homicide.<sup>22</sup>

Studies in the US also indicate young people who binge drink could be risking serious damage to their brains and increasing memory loss later in life. Adolescents may be even more vulnerable to brain damage from excessive drinking than older drinkers.<sup>23</sup>

Research indicates young women are drinking more than ever before, but this is an extremely dangerous trend, as women get drunk quicker, may become addicted sooner and may develop alcohol-related problems more quickly than men with similar drinking problems.<sup>24</sup>

# The link between alcohol and violence

Alcohol is a significant contributing factor to violence in Australia despite strategies to combat the problem.<sup>25</sup> Researchers have estimated that 47% of all those who commit violent crimes, and 43% of all victims of these crimes, were drunk prior to the event.<sup>26</sup> A 2006 study confirmed areas with large clusters of pubs and licensed premises have higher crime rates, experiencing almost twice as many alcohol-related problems as areas with lower concentrations of licensed premises.<sup>27</sup> Although both men and women are affected by alcohol-related violence, men under 34 make up the majority of hospitalisations for alcohol-caused assaults, with a similar profile found in alcohol-related road injuries.<sup>28</sup>

The above statistics would strongly suggest that one way to reduce violent crime is to reduce alcohol consumption. By limiting alcohol intake, people can make a big difference to their communities.

The cost to the community in terms of policing and health is huge, not to mention the distress and grief caused to family and friends when things go horribly wrong. Unfortunately, the messages put forward by advertisers only focus on a very narrow outcome of drinking alcohol – feeling good. As the research shows, for many people who abuse alcohol or binge drink, the outcome can be jail, injury or even death.

“Researchers have estimated that 47% of all those who commit violent crimes, and 43% of all victims of these crimes, were drunk prior to the event.” English et al, 1995.



# Tips for parents



Parents want the best for their kids, but when it comes to alcohol, people often inadvertently act in ways that can actually encourage their teenagers' alcohol abuse.

Some parents believe that allowing teenagers to drink at home is safer, because they will drink less than if they go out. This is unfortunate as the opposite is often true. Parents are in fact giving the green light to drinking, which may lower the inhibitions of their children to drink to excess, and help to develop dangerous habits that could seriously harm them both in the short and long term. In fact, the longer children can be kept away from alcohol altogether, the less likely they are to have alcohol-related problems later in life.<sup>29</sup>

Additionally, parents should know that supplying, serving or buying alcohol to anyone under the age of 18 is an offence with serious penalties, so providing alcohol for

under-aged children at home means that parents are breaking the law. For more information log on to the NSW Department of Gaming and Racing website at [www.dgr.nsw.gov.au](http://www.dgr.nsw.gov.au).

Other parents may binge drink themselves, perhaps at home in front of the TV or when out socialising. For younger children in particular, this can set a bad example which they may seek to copy later in life.

Parents should also be aware that if a young person gets drunk and commits a crime, they have a permanent criminal record which does not, as many people believe, expire when one turns 18. Binge drinking can increase the possibility of arrest for fighting, swearing or urinating in the street. A criminal record can jeopardise a young person's life by decreasing opportunities for employment and travel, to name but two.

# Can alcohol really affect your health?

The simple answer is yes.

Drinking alcohol heavily can seriously damage your health, no matter what age you are. It is important to recognise that for some people, consumption doesn't have to be excessive for health problems to develop.

In Australia, alcohol is second only to tobacco as a preventable cause of death.<sup>30</sup>

## Death by alcohol

Each year, around 3,000 people die and 65,000 people are hospitalised as a result of alcohol abuse.<sup>31</sup>

A large single dose of alcohol can be lethal. A blood alcohol level of about 300-400mg per 100ml (around 30 standard drinks) will usually cause loss of consciousness, but this will vary depending on how tolerant to alcohol someone is.<sup>32</sup>

Alcohol depresses the respiratory system, which is why death by alcohol usually results from respiratory failure.

Some people may vomit or pass out before alcohol will kill, but people should be aware that there is also the dangerous possibility of choking on your own vomit when passed out.<sup>33</sup>

## The long term risks of alcohol abuse

When you abuse alcohol over a long period of time, a number of serious health and other problems can arise. The long term risks include brain damage, liver damage, stomach ulcers, cancers, heart damage, stroke, high blood pressure, infertility in women, loss of sexual function in men, and social and work problems related to alcohol abuse, such as getting fired because you have missed work, or family conflict and breakdown.<sup>34</sup>



## Brain damage

Studies have revealed a consistent link between heavy drinking and physical brain damage and, for some people, genetic susceptibility means they are more likely to suffer brain damage than others.<sup>35</sup> Any brain damage that occurs after birth is known as acquired brain injury. The injury caused by alcohol abuse to the brain is known as alcohol related brain damage (or ARBI)<sup>36</sup> and worryingly over 2,500 Australians are treated for ARBI every year. The extent of damage depends on a person's age, gender, nutrition and pattern of alcohol consumption but everyone who drinks to excess should be aware that the effects of alcohol on the brain can be permanent.<sup>37</sup>

Drinking alcohol can damage your brain by affecting higher mental functions and social interaction.<sup>38</sup> The longer a person drinks, the more likely they are to be affected; however, binge drinking can also cause brain damage in the shorter term.<sup>39</sup>

Researchers have recently discovered that people who drink alcohol exhibit toxic effects not seen in brains of non-drinkers,<sup>40</sup> which means alcohol is just as dangerous to our health as smoking or taking other recreational drugs.

Alcohol can damage a brain in a number of ways. ARBI is associated with cerebellar atrophy (causing difficulties with balance and walking); cognitive difficulties; mood changes, confusion and hallucinations (which result from liver disease); a loss of short term memory; and problems with vision.<sup>41</sup> Women face greater memory loss than men. Studies suggest that women tend to develop brain 'shrinkage' and damage to their memory capabilities much faster than men who drink.<sup>42</sup>

Some alcoholics would rather drink than eat, and over time they suffer from a Vitamin B (thiamine) deficiency. Prolonged Vitamin B deficiency causes brain damage known as Korsakoff's syndrome. Victims suffer from apathy, confusion and profound memory impairment.<sup>43</sup>

## Mental health

Alcohol misuse is believed to contribute to a number of mental health conditions including alcoholic psychosis, alcohol dependence syndrome and alcohol-related dementia. Long-term heavy drinking is also a risk factor for depression and anxiety.<sup>44</sup>



# Alcohol abuse can ruin your appearance

Heavy drinking can take its toll on our appearance. Alcohol robs the body of much needed nutrients such as thiamine (B1) – which enables healthy brain function – and folate – which helps protect against cancer.

## Skin

Alcohol causes dehydration, which has an ageing effect on the skin. Even in low and moderate doses, alcohol can lead to broken capillaries on the skin's surface, which is why drinkers sometimes have a flushed face and heavy drinkers a red nose. Some studies have also linked alcohol with the skin condition psoriasis (scaly red patches of skin). If liver damage develops, the skin may look yellow due to jaundice.<sup>45</sup>

## Hair

Dehydration may also cause the hair to become dry, lose its lustre and be more susceptible to split ends. In addition, drinking can reduce levels of zinc and iron and lack of these nutrients may lead to hair thinning in women and baldness in men.

## Mouth and teeth

Some dentists say tooth decay is more common in heavy drinkers due to the sweet and acidic mixers consumed. Alcohol affects the healing process in the mouth, encouraging infection and gum disease, and can give you bad breath.



## Weight gain

Weight may increase because people often mix alcohol with high calorie mixers or may eat more when they drink.<sup>46</sup> Hangovers often cause people to feel hungry and less inclined to exercise, which can lead to weight gain.

## Bones and joints

Heavy drinking is linked with the painful condition called gout, when joints become swollen and inflamed.

Excessive alcohol consumption also leads to loss of calcium, increasing the risk of developing the bone-thinning disease osteoporosis.

## Eyes

One of the tell-tale signs of excessive drinking is bloodshot eyes. Ongoing loss of nutrients like B1 and zinc can eventually lead to the more serious condition for heavy drinkers of optic neuritis which can cause blindness.

Research suggests the sleep experienced under the influence of alcohol is less than satisfactory which does nothing for those bags under the eyes!<sup>47</sup>



## Liver disease and cancer

Liver disease is a well known cause of illness and death for those who drink to excess but did you know that even low risk drinking has been linked with liver disease? In women, as few as two to three drinks a day have been linked to cirrhosis, and in men, as few as three to four drinks per day.<sup>48</sup> In Australia, liver disease is a leading cause of alcohol-related deaths.<sup>49</sup> According to World Health Organisation figures, deaths from liver disease in the UK have risen dramatically since the 1950's, and the rise is being blamed on increased alcohol consumption.

The liver processes 90% of the toxic substances in the body, so if it stops working effectively due to alcohol abuse toxins accumulate in the blood and eventually the brain.<sup>51</sup> More importantly, the liver becomes less able to detoxify cancer-causing substances from the body.<sup>52</sup> There are three types of liver disease related to alcohol. Firstly, fatty liver is a common ailment of excessive drinkers and can cause scarring of the liver and cirrhosis. Fatty liver is reversible and can be treated by abstaining from alcohol. The other two diseases are more serious, and include alcoholic hepatitis, which inflames the

liver; and cirrhosis, which causes scarring of liver tissue. These conditions can be fatal, and there are few choices for treatment.<sup>53</sup>

Usually alcoholic cirrhosis occurs after more than ten years of heavy drinking, but this is not always the case. Some heavy drinkers develop cirrhosis much more quickly simply because their livers are more sensitive to alcohol than others.<sup>54</sup>

Everyone thinks that a serious or fatal illness will not affect them, but US Research indicates that around 10-35% of heavy drinkers (five to six standard drinks a day) develop alcoholic hepatitis and 10-20% develop cirrhosis.<sup>55</sup>

There is convincing evidence to indicate that alcohol consumption increases the risk of liver cancer. In addition to reducing the liver's ability to detoxify cancer-causing substances, the alcohol burning reaction causes the liver to produce five to 10 times more of a cancer-causing enzyme that causes liver injury.<sup>56</sup>

The percentage of liver cancer caused by alcohol has been estimated to range between 15% to 37%.<sup>57</sup> The number of women in NSW diagnosed with liver cancer between 1994 and 2003 doubled and the alarming rise is being partly blamed on an increase in binge drinking.<sup>58</sup>

## Alcohol and cancer

Alcohol is a known risk factor for many other cancers as well. The NSW Cancer Council recommends people limit or avoid drinking alcohol, because for some cancers research shows drinking any alcohol can increase cancer risk.

There is no evidence that alcohol at any level has any protective effect against cancer, but we do know that alcohol is considered highly carcinogenic, increasing the risk of mouth, pharynx, larynx, oesophagus, liver and breast cancers.

According to the World Cancer Research Fund, even very low levels of alcohol can increase the risk of colorectal and breast cancer, and if a person smokes, the risk of cancer is significantly greater.<sup>59</sup>

## Breast cancer

There is evidence suggesting women may be at increased risk of breast cancer from even moderate amounts of alcohol. A review in 1994 found that one alcoholic drink per day was associated with an 11% increase in the risk of breast cancer compared with non-drinkers.<sup>60</sup> Risk increases as the amount consumed increases. The NSW Cancer Council reveals that there is a 30% to 40% higher risk of breast cancer in women who consume at least 30g of alcohol per day (three standard drinks), when compared with non drinkers, while heavy drinking dramatically increases the risk of breast cancer. Reducing alcohol intake can reduce the risk of suffering breast cancer. Women with a genetic predisposition to breast cancer should avoid alcohol completely. The Cancer Council also reveals that a person who drinks alcohol is more likely to get breast cancer than someone who smokes.<sup>61</sup>

“Alcohol consumption is not recommended. If consumed at all, limit alcoholic drinks to less than two drinks a day for men and one for women.”

Recommendation by the World Cancer Research Fund in 1997.



## Kidney disease

Heavy drinking can increase the risk of developing high blood pressure which in turn can cause chronic kidney disease. Early stage chronic kidney disease is often 'silent', so you might not see or feel symptoms. Therefore, it's important for people who have an increased risk of developing kidney disease to be tested as kidney disease can often be successfully treated when detected early.<sup>62</sup>

Alcohol abuse can also cause shrinkage and scarring to the kidneys due to parts of the tissue being destroyed through the strain of eliminating alcohol.<sup>63</sup>

## Bone structure

Alcohol can interfere with calcium and bone metabolism and acute alcohol consumption can lead to increased loss of calcium in the urine, increasing the risk of osteoporosis. Studies in alcoholics

have shown that alcohol is directly toxic to bone forming cells. Moreover, studies demonstrate that alcohol-induced bone loss may be partially restored when alcohol use is discontinued.<sup>64</sup>

## Pregnancy

Drinking while pregnant can cause serious harm to an unborn baby. A child may be born with Foetal Alcohol Syndrome (FAS), a condition that causes unusual facial features and low birth weight, and later, may lead to delayed development and behavioural problems. In fact, the World Health Organisation believes that alcohol is the most common cause of development delay at or before birth. Other babies may have Foetal Alcohol Effects (FAE) which causes serious permanent disabilities.<sup>65</sup>

The effects of low risk drinking are less obvious, but may include abnormalities and subtle behavioural problems – for example, decreased motor skills and decreased academic achievement.<sup>66</sup>

# Is alcohol good for the heart?

It is often said that drinking in moderation is good for the heart. However, recent research indicates that in order to gain benefits for the heart from alcohol, a person would have to drink quite heavily, which would cause more health problems than it would cure.<sup>67</sup>

Heavy drinking can actually increase the risk of heart failure, stroke and high blood pressure as well as other serious health problems such as liver disease.<sup>68</sup> It is estimated around 11% of male and 6% of

female high blood pressure cases can be attributed to drinking too much alcohol.<sup>69</sup> An Austrian study also found that regular consumption of more than 100mg of alcohol per day (10 standard drinks) was a risk factor for early development of deposits that clog the arteries.<sup>70</sup>

If you are a non-drinker, don't start drinking thinking it will give you a healthy heart. Prevent heart disease by exercising, giving up smoking, and following a healthy diet.

“There are no health benefits overall, I think that there's probably no stage where the benefits outweigh the harms.”

Dr Rod Jackson, Professor of Epidemiology at University of Auckland.<sup>71</sup>



## Sexual function

Alcohol abuse can interfere with testicular function and male hormone production resulting in testicular shrinkage, sterility, impotence, loss of libido, reduction in size of the prostate gland, decreased sperm production<sup>72</sup> and the reduction of male secondary sex characteristics, such as facial and chest hair.<sup>73</sup>

When alcohol is broken down in the body, it seems to change the balance of reproductive hormones in men and women. In men, evidence suggests alcohol is toxic to the testes, causing reduced testosterone levels. It may also interfere with normal sperm structure and movement.<sup>74</sup> In a study of normal healthy men who received large amounts of alcohol daily for four weeks, testosterone levels declined after only five days and continued to fall throughout the study

period.<sup>75</sup> Long-term testosterone deficiency may contribute to feminisation in males, such as breast enlargement.<sup>76</sup>

Chronic, heavy drinking in women may be a factor in causing menstruation to stop, irregular cycles, failure to ovulate and increased risk of spontaneous abortions.<sup>77</sup> Some of these problems were also found in women who would be considered social drinkers, who drank about three drinks a day in a three-week study. A significant number had abnormal menstrual cycles and a delay or lack of ovulation.<sup>78</sup>



## The short term health risks

There are also worrying and possibly deadly short term risks of abusing alcohol, including blackouts, passing out, loss of balance and dizziness, depression, missing work, drink driving and involvement in violence.<sup>79</sup>

# Alcohol abuse affects everyone

People who drink to excess don't just hurt themselves, but can dramatically impact the lives of others. For example, some people have sex when they have been drinking and regret it when they sober up. People who have been drinking are more likely to have unsafe sex that can result in pregnancy or sexually transmitted diseases.<sup>80</sup>

High blood alcohol levels are a factor in one third of all road accident deaths,<sup>81</sup> while a 2006 study by the NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research showed that neighbourhoods with large clusters of licensed premises (pubs, clubs and licensed restaurants) have higher crime rates.<sup>82</sup>

The 1996 Women's Safety Australia Survey by the Australian Bureau Statistics showed that around 40% of physical and sexual assaults on women in the past 12 months involved alcohol.

It is estimated that alcohol problems cost Australian workplaces \$1.9 billion per year. Research has shown that absentee rates for high risk drinkers were greater than that for the general population, with 14.7% of high risk drinkers absent from work compared with 8.6% of low risk drinkers.

The annual cost of alcohol-related social problems to the Australian community was estimated in 1998-99 to total \$7.6 billion.<sup>83</sup>

“There is a strong link between alcohol abuse and gambling. Drinking alcohol impairs our judgement and lowers our inhibitions, and the use of poker machines, for example, inherently involves risk which feeds on this lack of inhibition.”

Gerard Byrne, Manager, The Salvation Army Recovery Services.

# How much is too much?

It is important to realise that alcohol affects people in different ways, so according to the National Alcohol Strategy 2006-2009, no amount of alcohol can be said to be safe for everyone, and we should be aware that there will always be some risk to our health and social well being if we drink. However, the government has provided guidelines to help minimise these risks.<sup>84</sup>

The following table indicates low risk drinking levels for men and women.<sup>85</sup> Drinking in excess of these guidelines indicates harmful use of alcohol.

Women can't drink as much as men because women's bodies don't break down the alcohol as quickly. This is due to differences in weight, as well as differences in the amount of body fat and water in the body, plus the fact that women have smaller livers.<sup>87</sup>

## These guidelines don't apply if:

- You are under 18 years of age.
- You are pregnant.
- You are ill or frail.
- You have a condition made worse by drinking (eg. liver disease).
- You are on certain medications (eg. Tranquillisers)
- You are going to drive, operate machinery or engage in an activity involving risk or thrill.<sup>88</sup>

### Healthy non-pregnant women

### Healthy men

#### Low risk

2 standard drinks per day

4 standard drinks per day

No more than 2 standard drinks per day

No more than 6 standard drinks per day

No more than 14 standard drinks per week.

No more than 28 standard drinks per week

1-2 alcohol-free days per week

1-2 alcohol-free days per week<sup>86</sup>



“Watch out for drinks poured in private homes, as these can often be more generous than those in public places.”

# What is one standard drink?

To drink sensibly it is important to understand what a ‘standard’ drink is. A standard drink contains 10g of alcohol – this is equal to one glass of full strength beer (285ml), two 285ml glasses of light beer, or five 285ml glasses of extra light beer. It is also equal to one small (100ml) glass of wine, one measure (30ml) of spirits or one 60ml glass of fortified wine such as sherry or port.

Take a look at the label on a bottle or can as it will explain how many standard drinks it contains. One can of regular beer contains about one and a half standard drinks, while a bottle of wine contains about seven.

Although most pubs and clubs serve standard drinks, some serve drinks in non-standard measures. If you’re not sure whether the drinks being served are standard or not, you should ask. Watch out for drinks poured in private homes, as these can often be more generous than those in public places. For example, some large wine glasses hold at least 200ml of wine which equals two standard drinks.<sup>89</sup>

It is important to note that, as described in this booklet, research indicates there may be negative health effects of even very moderate consumption of alcohol.



**Note:** Medium strength beer contains an average of 3.5% alcohol. A schooner of medium strength beer is just over one standard drink.

# Moderation may be difficult

Many people find it difficult to drink moderately. According to the Royal Australasian College of Physicians, large numbers of people consistently fall into the risky or high-risk categories of alcohol consumption. It estimates two-thirds of alcohol consumed is at a risky level.<sup>90</sup>

As we have noted above, people react differently to alcohol. There are many factors responsible for this, including a person's age, gender, race or ethnicity, physical wellbeing,

speed of alcohol consumption, food or medicine intact, and family history of alcoholism.

Exactly why someone becomes addicted to alcohol while another doesn't is not clear. Some researchers believe there is a genetic factor involved and that some people are predisposed to having a certain brain chemistry that makes them susceptible to drinking problems. Another reason may be learned behaviour within a family, where alcohol serves as a way to manage emotions.<sup>91</sup>

# One drink can be one too many

Certain people simply cannot handle alcohol, and for them, any level of drinking can be dangerous. People who fall into this category include those who have a family history of alcoholism, who have had a stroke, liver or pancreatic disease or precancerous signs for cancer of the oesophagus, larynx, pharynx or mouth and particularly breast cancer.<sup>92</sup>

Certain medicines should not be taken with alcohol, so it is important to ask your doctor or chemist for advice. For example, using alcohol with aspirin means an increased risk of gastrointestinal bleeding.<sup>93</sup>

Non-drinking is always an option. For many people it's the best option and for some people it's the only option. Around 18% of Australians don't drink alcohol at all.

“Non-drinking is always an option.  
For many people it's the best option and  
for some people it's the only option.”

# Do you have a drinking problem?

Answering 'yes' to some or all of the following points may indicate alcohol dependence:

- Drinking excessive amounts (in excess of guidelines for safe drinking).
- Drinking one type or brand of alcoholic beverage (for example, just beer or wine).
- Drink-seeking behaviour, such as hanging out with others who drink or only going to events that include drinking.
- Increased tolerance (drinking increasing amounts to gain same effect).
- Decreased tolerance (drinking decreasing amounts to gain the same effect).
- Withdrawal symptoms (physical symptoms after going a short time without drinking)

- Drinking to relieve or avoid withdrawal symptoms (such as drinking to 'cure' a hangover, or to stop the shakes)
- Some awareness of craving for alcohol or inability to control drinking habits (whether or not you admit it to others.)
- A return to drinking after a period of abstinence (deciding to quit and not being able to follow through).

If you are alcohol-dependent, you will probably require outside help to stop drinking. This could include detoxification, medical treatment, counselling and/or attending a self-help support group.

See inside back cover of this booklet for contact details.



# Tips for drinking less or no alcohol

If you choose not to drink, or would like to stop drinking alcohol, it is important to ensure you have enjoyable alternatives available. Ideas for 'mocktails' and other refreshing drinks are available at [salvos.org.au/mocktails](http://salvos.org.au/mocktails).

If you do choose to drink alcohol, following are some tips for controlling the amount you drink:

- Quench your thirst with a non-alcoholic drink.
- Experiment with the wide array of non or low-alcohol alternatives available.
- Drink slowly. Put your drink down between sips.
- Be careful about confusing large serves of alcohol with standard measures – eg. Glasses of wine may be much larger than the standard 100ml.
- Try not to get involved in 'shouts', this tends to force you to keep up with the pace of those around you.
- Eat before and during drinking.
- Avoid salty foods, these make you thirsty.
- Don't let people top up your drink until it's finished – it's too easy to lose track of how much you are drinking.
- Try alternating alcoholic drinks with non-alcoholic drinks.
- Drink water between alcoholic drinks.
- Don't allow yourself to get bored. Dance or have a game of pool if you're at a pub.
- Have alcohol-free days.
- Don't be pressured into drinking more than you want to.<sup>94</sup>

“Alcohol is a drug that, if used excessively, can kill. Governments need to make people aware of the risks, just like they have done with tobacco.”

Gerard Byrne, Manager, The Salvation Army Recovery Services.

## What if someone you know drinks too much?

Besides being careful about personal alcohol consumption, it's good to care about other people's drinking. Don't pressure friends to drink alcohol. If guests drink too much, don't let them drive – call a taxi or invite them to stay overnight.

If you think a friend has a drinking problem, encourage them to seek help from a doctor, a counselling service, or one of the contacts listed inside the back cover of this booklet.

People who are concerned about the alcohol use of their friends or loved ones may also wish to look at the questionnaire under 'Do you have a drinking problem?' on page 19 of this booklet.

**Disclaimer:** This booklet has been developed to assist the community in general and should not be used to diagnose or prescribe treatment for any alcohol problem. For the diagnosis and treatment of alcohol problems please see a qualified medical practitioner.

## How can we stop the devastating effects of alcohol?

Today's society has easy access to cheap alcohol which has contributed to rising figures of alcohol abuse, and alcohol related violence and disease. Many thousands of people are devastated by alcohol abuse each year, and we need to encourage our friends, families and politicians to ensure that all communities are aware of the consequences of abusing alcohol.

Talk to your local member today, and ask that the government prioritise addressing this important public health issue.



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# Contacts & support

The Salvation Army Bridge Program is a residential recovery program with all centres also offering non-residential support such as referral, one-to-one support, support over the telephone, group work and '12 step' meetings.

Whether you're seeking a word of advice about yourself or a loved one, some day to day support, or entry into our recovery

program, you can contact the Bridge Program centre nearest you to talk things through (see list below).

Our caring telephone counsellors at Salvo Care Line are also available 24 hours a day to provide a listening ear or to confidentially discuss your options with you. Phone **1300 36 36 22** (NSW, ACT, Qld).

## ACT

### Canberra

Ph: (02) 6295 1256 (m)

## NSW

### Sydney

Ph: (02) 9212 2322 (m)

Ph: (02) 9211 7300 (w)

### Blue Mountains

Ph: (02) 4782 7392 (mwd)

### Central Coast

Ph: (02) 4388 4588 (w)

### Morisset

Ph: (02) 4973 1495 (m)

Ph: (02) 4973 4146 (mdd)

### Newcastle

Ph: (02) 4961 1257 (m)

## Nowra

Ph: (02) 4422 4604

## QLD

### Brisbane

Ph: (07) 3369 0922 (m)

Ph: (07) 3369 0355 (mwd)

### Gold Coast

Ph: (07) 5594 7288 (mw)

Ph: (07) 5571 5248 (mwd)

### Townsville

Ph: (07) 4772 3607 (m)

Ph: (07) 4721 0151 (w)

## NT

### Darwin

Ph: (08) 8981 4199

## SA

### Adelaide

Ph: (08) 8231 2555

## TAS

### Hobart

Ph: (03) 6278 8140

## VIC

### Melbourne

Ph: (03) 9521 2770

### Crisis Line

Ph: (03) 9536 7777

## WA

### Perth

Ph: (08) 9398 2077

**Key:** • **m** men only • **w** women only • **mdd** men, dual diagnosis • **mwd** men & women detox

## Youth Support Network

Provides drug and alcohol programs specifically for young people.

## ACT

### Canberra

Ph. (02) 6248 7191

## NSW

### Sydney

Ph. (02) 9331 2266

## FYRST

(Follow-on Youth Recovery Support Team)

Support for young people 16-25 years after giving up drugs or alcohol.

## NSW

### Parramatta

Ph: (02) 9687 3499

### Fairfield, Sydney

Ph: (02) 9725 7779

## Alcoholics Anonymous

To find out details of AA meetings near you, visit [www.alcoholicsanonymous.org.au](http://www.alcoholicsanonymous.org.au)

## For more information

[salvos.org.au/alcohol](http://salvos.org.au/alcohol)

salvos.org.au



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