

ALCOHOL

What is alcohol?

Alcohol is an intoxicating substance made from fermented starches. It is the most widely used psychoactive, or mood-changing, recreational drug in Australia.

Alcohol is often mistakenly believed to be a stimulant. This is because drinking a small amount of alcohol may initially reduce tension or inhibitions, making a person feel more relaxed or excited. For this reason, people often drink alcohol at social occasions.

However, alcohol is actually a central nervous system depressant that affects almost all a person's cells and systems. Increasing alcohol concentrations in the body inhibits many of the brain's functions, dampening the motor and sensory centres, and rapidly making judgement, co-ordination and balance more difficult, and slowing one's reflexes.

The active drug in all alcoholic drinks is ethanol. This drug is produced as a result of the fermentation of grains (beer), vegetables (vodka), and fruits (wine), changing sugars into ethyl alcohol. Pure alcohol has no taste and is a colourless liquid. Alcoholic drinks vary in appearance and taste due to the other ingredients contained within them and as a result of the method by which they are manufactured.

Alcohol only takes a few minutes to reach the brain. It is absorbed directly into the bloodstream through the walls of the stomach and small intestine, and is then quickly distributed to all parts of the body, including the brain. Food in the stomach slows down the rate at which alcohol is absorbed, but does not prevent intoxication or drunkenness, as all alcohol consumed reaches the bloodstream.

Sobering up takes time. The liver is the main organ of the body responsible for removing alcohol from the bloodstream. The liver can only work at a fixed rate, taking about an hour to break down the alcohol in a standard drink. Cold showers, exercise, black coffee, fresh air or vomiting will not speed up the process.

How many people use alcohol?

According to the 2001 National Drug Household Survey more than 80% of the Australian population aged over 14 years consumed alcohol in the 12 months prior to the survey.

The Survey also showed that:

- **17 years was the average age at which Australians had their first full serve of alcohol.**
- **in 2001, nine out of every ten (90.4%) people had consumed a full glass of alcohol in their lifetime.**
- **in 2001, 1.3 million Australians (8.3%) consumed alcohol daily, 6.2 million (39.5%) on a weekly basis and a further 5.4 million (34.6%) on a less than weekly basis.**
- **almost one in three (31.2%) male teenagers consumed alcohol weekly, compared with one in four (25.4%) females.**
- **three-quarters (74.7%) of Australians aged 14 years and over accepted the regular use of alcohol by adults, while 7.8% associated alcohol with a 'drug problem'.**

Other names for alcohol

Alcohol is also known as drink, grog, piss, booze, juice, liquor, sauce and tinnies.

What are the short-term effects of alcohol?

The short-term effects of using alcohol may include:

- relaxation
- reduced concentration
- lack of co-ordination and slower reflexes
- loss of inhibitions and more confidence
- flushed appearance
- blurred vision and slurred speech
- intense moods, e.g. aggression, elation, depression
- headache
- nausea, vomiting, sleep
- at high doses – coma and death

What are the long-term effects of alcohol?

The long-term effects of using alcohol may include:

Drinking a lot of alcohol regularly over time is likely to cause physical, emotional or social problems. These may include:

- poor diet
- stomach problems
- frequent infections
- skin problems
- liver, heart and brain damage
- sexual impotence and a reduction in fertility
- concentration and short-term memory problems
- depression
- family and relationship problems
- poor work performance
- legal and financial difficulties

Damage to some body organs can be permanent.