

WOMEN & 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.

How does alcohol affect women?

Alcohol affects women differently to men.

When swallowed, alcohol is absorbed directly into the bloodstream through the walls of the stomach and small intestine, before being distributed throughout the body. The blood alcohol concentration (BAC) in a woman's body will almost always be higher than that in a man's body after drinking exactly the same amount of alcohol. This is because women tend to have a smaller physical build than men, so alcohol is distributed (throughout the body's water) over a smaller volume. Women also tend to have more fatty tissue than men, and alcohol is not taken up by fatty tissue. As a result, the alcohol will be more concentrated in a woman's body, producing a higher BAC.

The liver is the main organ of the body responsible for removing alcohol from the bloodstream. On average, women have smaller livers than men, and the ability to break down alcohol is limited by the size of the liver.

It is for these reasons that women often get drunk more quickly than men, and they recover from drinking more slowly than men.

In addition, women may develop liver damage and other health problems at lower levels of alcohol consumption than men.

It is therefore recommended that women drink less alcohol than men.

Is it safe to drink during pregnancy?

It is not known whether there is any safe level of alcohol consumption during pregnancy. Nor is there any certainty about whether any particular stage of pregnancy is more vulnerable to the effects of drinking than others.

The World Health Organisation suggests that there is no safe level at which alcohol can be drunk during pregnancy, and that the safest approach for pregnant women is not to consume any alcohol at all.



It is also recommended that women wanting to become pregnant limit their alcohol consumption to infrequent, small amounts.

Alcohol consumed during pregnancy crosses the placenta to the baby, and can cause problems such as bleeding, miscarriage, stillbirth and premature birth. It can also result in damage to the unborn child, with symptoms such as low attention span, distractibility and slow reaction times.

Foetal Alcohol Syndrome may occur in the children of heavy and dependent drinkers, resulting in birth defects such as an abnormally small head, defective development of facial tissues, outer ear abnormalities, abnormally small eyes and heart and genital defects. After birth, these babies can suffer withdrawal symptoms, including tremors, irritability, fits and bloated abdomen.

Is it safe for breastfeeding mothers to drink?

While the effects of consuming alcohol by breastfeeding mothers are unclear, it is known that alcohol is excreted into breast milk. During the first 12 months of a baby's life, the developing brain may be damaged by alcohol. In addition, alcohol can reduce the milk supply.

It may be that having only one drink occasionally is safe, but in general it is better to avoid consumption of alcohol as much as possible while breastfeeding a baby.

What is a safe drinking level for women?

In order to reduce the risks associated with drinking alcohol it is recommended that:

- **women drink no more than 2 standard drinks a day, with 1-2 alcohol-free days a week.**
- **women drink no more than 4 standard drinks during any one occasional heavy drinking day. Drinking at these levels reduces the long-term risk of health problems due to alcohol.**
- **women should eat before they drink.**
- **quench thirst on water or soft drinks**
- **try low-alcohol alternatives**
- **have an alcohol-free drink as a spacer.**

Pregnant women or those planning to become pregnant should avoid alcohol altogether, as alcohol can affect the unborn child.

