

STANDARD DRINKS AND SAFE DRINKING LEVELS

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.

What is a Standard Drink?

In Australia, the use of standard drink sizes have been designed to help people monitor their alcohol consumption and exercise control over the amount they drink.

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

The following are all equal to approximately one standard drink:

- one 425ml glass (a schooner) of light beer (2.7% alcohol)
- one 285ml glass (a middy) of regular beer (4.9% alcohol)
- one 100ml glass of wine (12% alcohol)
- one 30ml nip of spirits (40% alcohol)
- one 60ml glass of port or sherry (20% alcohol)

It is important to remember that the 'standard' size of drinks served in some hotels, or at home may be bigger than the standard drinks you are used to. Large wine glasses can hold two standard drinks or even more! In addition, cocktails can contain as many as five or six standard drinks, depending on the recipe.

Is there a safe drinking level?

A moderate amount of alcohol does not harm most people, however there is no guaranteed safe level of drinking. To reduce the risks associated with drinking alcohol it is recommended that:

- women drink no more than 2 standard drinks a day, and men no more than 4 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, and men no more than 6 standard drinks. Drinking at these levels reduces the long-term risk of health problems due to alcohol
- everyone should eat before they drink
- quench thirst on water or soft drinks
- try low-alcohol alternatives
- have an alcohol-free drink as a spacer



Alcohol should be avoided altogether by:

- pregnant women or those planning to become pregnant, as alcohol can affect the unborn child
- anyone with diabetes, as alcohol has a high sugar content
- anyone intending to drive or to operate machinery
- anyone taking other drugs, including over-the-counter or prescribed medicines, as the combination of these substances can be especially dangerous and unpredictable. For instance, consuming alcohol with other depressant drugs such as sleeping pills can be fatal, as this can cause the central nervous system to switch off brain and heart activity. Alcohol mixed with methadone or heroin can cause coma

Other names for alcohol

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

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?

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.

