

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 of a person's cells and systems. Increasing alcohol concentrations in the body inhibits many of the brain's functions by dampening the motor and sensory centres, rapidly making judgement, coordination and balance more difficult, and slowing reflexes.

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 2013 [National Drug Strategy Household Survey](#) almost 80% of the Australian population aged over 14 years had consumed alcohol in the past 12 months.

The number of people drinking daily was down to 6.5% from 7.2% in the 2010 Household Survey. Men were almost twice as likely as women to drink daily.

The 2013 Survey also showed that:

- **Around 1 in 5 people drink alcohol at a level that puts them at risk of harm or injury over their lifetime.** For the first time, a decrease in risky drinking was recorded in 2013 compared to 2010.
- **Males were far more likely than females to drink alcohol in risky quantities** and those aged between 18-29 years were more likely than any other age group to consume alcohol in quantities that place them at risk of injury or other harm over their lifetime.
- **More than one in six people aged 18-24 consume more than 10 standard drinks at least once a month.**
- **Alcohol was nominated as the drug of most concern to the general community (nominated by 42.5%)** in the 2013 survey, followed by methamphetamines (16.1%) and tobacco smoking (14.5%). However 45.1% of people nominated alcohol as the drug most approved of for general use.
- **Recent drinkers who drank at least once a week at levels that put them at risk of harm were 1.6 times more likely to experience very high levels of psychological distress** and a higher proportion had been diagnosed with a mental illness.
- **The proportion of people being physically abused by a person under the influence of alcohol increased significantly** between 2007 and 2013 (from 4.5% to 8.7%).

Alcohol-related harms

In Australia, alcohol is the second leading cause of drug-related death and hospital admissions after tobacco.

Alcohol is associated with a range of harms. Some harms are associated with drinking too much on one occasion (e.g. accidents, injuries, unsafe sex and alcohol poisoning) while other harms are associated with regular drinking (e.g. liver problems, cancer and alcohol dependence).

The major risks associated with alcohol use include immediate problems such as:

- Increased risk of experiencing an **accident or injury**, for example through **road traffic accidents, falls, fires and drowning**. This risk is especially high among young people
- Increased risk of **sexually transmitted infections** (STIs) or unintended pregnancy
- Increased chance of experiencing **violence**, for example getting into fights or being assaulted

Longer-term problems include:

- **Alcohol dependence**
- **Brain damage** and problems with brain development
- **Malnutrition**
- **Cardiovascular (heart) problems**
- **Cancer** – alcohol has been linked to a range of cancers, including **mouth, oesophagus, liver and breast cancers**
- **Liver problems**
- Increased risk of mental health problems such as **anxiety and depression**
- Alcohol use may also increase problems with **diabetes** and **obesity**
- **Alcohol use in pregnancy** can also lead to serious problems such as **Fetal Alcohol Syndrome** in the unborn child



NHMRC guidelines on safe drinking level

A substantial proportion of people drink at levels that increase their risk of alcohol-related harm.

The **2009 NHMRC Australian Guidelines to Reduce Health Risks from Drinking Alcohol** aim to establish the evidence base for future policies and community materials on reducing the health risks that arise from drinking alcohol. The guidelines communicate evidence concerning these risks to the Australian community to allow individuals to make informed decisions regarding the amount of alcohol they choose to drink.

The guidelines suggest:

- **No more than 2 standard drinks a day** for healthy men and women will reduce the lifetime risk of harm from alcohol-related disease or injury
- **No more than 4 standard drinks on a single occasion** for healthy men and women, will reduce the risk of alcohol-related injury arising from that occasion.
- **Not drinking alcohol is the safest option** for children and young people under 18 years of age.
- **Children under 15 years of age are at the greatest risk of harm from drinking** and for this age group not drinking alcohol is especially important. For young people aged 15–17 years, the safest option is to delay the initiation of drinking for as long as possible.
- **There is no safe drinking level for women who are pregnant** or planning a pregnancy, or for women who are breastfeeding. Pregnant and breastfeeding women are therefore recommended to abstain completely from alcohol.