

alcohol



For many people alcohol is synonymous with friendly catch ups and fun times, especially around the festive season. Why we even have beer ads selling dolls of our favourite cricket heroes including Warnie, Beefy and Boony. Like caffeine, alcohol is fine in moderation. But how much is too much? And when does alcohol consumption become a problem to our health, our relationships and our lives?

standard drinks

Different types of alcoholic drinks contain different concentrations of pure alcohol. A standard drink is defined as one that contains 10 grams of pure alcohol. A standard drink is a unit of measurement. In the same way you measure how many kilometres traveled on a road trip, one standard drink measures the amount of alcohol consumed.

The following are equal to approximately one standard drink:

- middy of beer (285ml)
- nip (30ml) of spirits
- small glass (100ml) of wine
- small glass (60ml) of fortified wine (like sherry or port)

guidelines at a glance

Due to the different ways alcohol affects different people, there is no amount of alcohol that can be safe for everyone. The following suggestions are guidelines only based on the National Health and Medical Research Centre Council's guidelines, which provide average acceptable levels of drinking over time and levels for occasional 'heavy' drinking days.

| For Men | For Women |
|---|---|
| An average of no more than 4 standard drinks a day, and no more than 28 standard drinks over a week | An average of no more than 2 standard drinks a day, and no more than 14 standard drinks over a week |
| Not more than 6 standard drinks during any one occasional heavy drinking day | Not more than 4 standard drinks during any one occasional heavy drinking day |
| One or two alcohol-free days (AFD's) per week | One or two alcohol-free days per week |

“Like caffeine, alcohol is fine in moderation [however] there is no amount of alcohol that can be safe for everyone.”



on when you have to ... off when you can

pace yourself

Drinking alcohol should be spread over several hours. Men, for example, should not consume more than two standard drinks in the first hour, and no more than one standard drink per hour thereafter. Women should not consume more than one standard drink per hour.

These guidelines assume that the person drinking alcohol:

- is not on medication
- is not pregnant
- will not be driving
- will not be operating machinery.

women and alcohol

A lower amount of alcohol is recommended for women because alcohol tends to have a greater affect on women for the following reasons:

- 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 body fat than men, and alcohol is not taken up by body fat.
- On average, women have smaller livers than men, and the ability to break down alcohol is limited by the size of the liver.
- The level of hormones in a woman's body can possibly increase the effects of alcohol.
- If a woman is taking the contraceptive pill, her body's ability to break down alcohol may be reduced.

tips to avoid getting tanked

- Many hotels and bars don't serve standard drinks – they might be bigger. Large wine glasses can hold two standard drinks – or even more!
- Drinks served at home often contain more alcohol than a standard drink
- Cocktails can contain as many as five or six standard drinks, depending on the recipe
- The standard drink of wine is based on 12 per cent alcohol. Watch out for those high-alcohol Aussie wines, which can often come in around 14.5 per cent or even more
- Start with a soft drink or water: You will drink much faster if you are thirsty, so have a non-alcoholic drink to quench your thirst before you start drinking alcohol.
- Eat before or while you are drinking: Eating slows your drinking pace and fills you up. If you have a full stomach, alcohol will be absorbed more slowly
- Avoid salty snacks: Salty food like chips or nuts make you thirsty, so you drink more
- Avoid 'shouts': Don't get involved in 'shouts', or rounds. Drink at your own pace- not someone else's. If you do get stuck in a shout, buy a non-alcoholic drink for yourself when it's your turn.
- Pace yourself: Try having a 'spacer', a non-alcoholic drink every second or third drink.
- Try the low-alcohol alternative: A wide range of light beers are available. Low-alcohol or non-alcoholic wines are also becoming more available. Most places that serve cocktails also serve non-alcoholic versions.

alcohol facts

- The cost to the Australian community for alcohol-related social problems is estimated to be \$7.6 billion
- On a per person basis, Australia is the 9th largest consumer of beer in the world
- Approx 10% of the population consume alcohol at levels considered to cause risk to their health in the long-term (National drug Survey 2001)
- Alcohol is involved in 62% of all police attendances, 73% of assaults, 77% of stress offences, 40% of domestic violence incidents and 90% of late night calls
- Alcohol costs Australian workforces more than \$1.9 billion each year due to absenteeism, reduced productivity, work injuries and deaths (Collins and Lapsley 2002)

how do i know if i am drinking too much?

You've left it too late if you find out that you have been drinking too much when your doctor tells you that you have irreversible damage to your body from alcohol. It is much better to do something about your drinking long before getting to that stage.

You are drinking more alcohol than you should if: your doctor warns you to cut down; your partner and others close to you express concern or even argue with you about alcohol; you realise that you have lost control of your drinking; you have been caught drink-driving more than once or with a high breath alcohol; you find yourself telling lies, being deceitful and covering up about how much you drink; you hide alcohol or re-arrange your schedule so that you can drink alcohol throughout the day; you find yourself drinking your first alcohol for the day earlier and earlier; you often wake up with no appetite, nausea, vomiting, dry retching, tremor of the fingers, or sweats; you have been involved in fights when drunk; you often cannot remember what happened during your last drinking session.

what should I do if I think I am drinking too much?

These days, there is plenty of help available. Each state or territory in Australia now has a telephone help line to provide advice, referral contacts and information or offer counselling. If you seek additional information, there is now also a web site at www.adin.com.au.

Your family GP is always a good place to start and may prefer to refer you to a counsellor or another doctor with a special interest in this problem. The first step involves an assessment of how much you drink and the nature and extent of specific health, social and economic problems that you have experienced as a result of alcohol. Your doctor may give you some feedback about the risks of health, social and economic problems you are likely to experience if you continue drinking at your current level. Then it's time for you to decide whether you want to stop drinking completely or cut down.

People who are over 40 years or have moderate to severe alcohol dependence often find it easier to stop completely than cut down their drinking, while people who are younger or only have mild alcohol dependence often prefer to cut down and find it easier to cut down than to stop. It's easier working through this with someone rather than doing all this on your own. If you decide to cut down, you need to set very specific targets for yourself. Which days of the week are you going to allow yourself to drink? What beverage will you drink? How many standard drinks of that beverage are you going to allow yourself to drink on each drinking day? When is this contract going to start and when will it finish? Experienced counsellors can provide you with a lot of useful tips that make it a little easier to keep your drinking under control.

further help and support

Alcoholics Anonymous www.aa.org.au
 DrinkWise Australia www.drinkwise.com.au
 Centrecare www.centrecare.com.au

Andrew May, www.andrewmay.com

Reference Sources: Australian Drug Foundation