

Alcohol and Binge Drinking

Alcohol is the most widely used recreational drug in Australia. This means that, for a lot of people, drinking alcohol in moderation is accepted and considered sociable. But for others, drinking can get out of control, causing harm to themselves and others. This can result in heavy harmful drinking (like binge drinking) or alcoholism (alcohol addiction).

Alcohol is a depressant. This means that it will slow down your coordination and judgement and your response time, but it will not necessarily make you feel depressed. However, alcohol can exaggerate the mood you're in prior to you starting to drink. So if you have mental health issues, for example if you're feeling depressed, alcohol can make these feelings stronger.

The effects

The effects of alcohol vary from person to person and there are a number of factors that can influence how you might be affected by alcohol, including:

- Age, gender and body weight
- How regularly you drink
- The type of drink (e.g. spirits vs wine)
- How quickly you drink and how much
- Whether you have eaten
- If you have mixed drinks and drugs
- The mood you were in prior to drinking
- Your general health
- The environment you are in when you drink

There are some risks associated with alcohol, especially when you have had too much to drink or have been binge-drinking. Short term effects include:

- Headaches
- Feeling sick/vomiting
- Violence/getting into fights, being argumentative and aggressive
- Making wrong decisions, including in relation to safe sex
- Accidents due to clumsiness
- Feeling dizzy
- Passing out
- Feeling out of control – like slurring your words
- Dehydration
- Hangovers

The effects over time

Long term risks include:

- Loss of memory
- Damage to general physical health including: increased risk of cancers, heart damage, liver damage, high blood pressure, stomach ulcers, and brain damage.
- Alcohol dependence, psychological and physical: this can creep up on you because tolerance gradually increases the more you drink on a regular basis. This means you may need more

alcohol to get the same effect. In other words, you may seem to be getting better at 'holding' your drink when it could be a sign of a developing problem.

- Conflict with family and friends
- Feeling anxious and nervous
- Poor muscle control
- Hallucinations

You can overdose and die from alcohol. Signs of an alcohol overdose include nausea, vomiting, falling into a coma, shallow breathing, pale skin and loss of bladder control. Severe alcohol poisoning can lead to death.

It's not good to drink

- If you're pregnant
- If you are taking other drugs or medicine (unless the doctor says it's okay)
- If you have physical health problems
- If you're going to drive or use machinery
- If you're feeling depressed or anxious
- When you're going swimming or participating in risk-taking activities (e.g. rock climbing)
- If you're under 18 years of age

Binge drinking

Binge-drinking is a term that is used to describe drinking to get drunk, heavy drinking sessions over a short period of time, or drinking continuously over a number of days. Some people think that because they are not drinking every day that there are less risks and that they will not have any negative effects. Binge drinking increases the risk of alcohol poisoning and has many of the risks associated with short-term use described above.

Reducing alcohol intake

Sometimes it can be hard to say no to drinking, especially if all your mates are drinking and putting the pressure on you to drink. There are some ways to stay safe when drinking and managing going without drinking. These can include:

- Eating prior to drinking and while drinking
- Drink water in between drinks
- Don't mix alcohol and other drugs
- Finish your drink before topping it up, this means you can keep count and stop at a certain number
- Don't drink by yourself
- Leave early if you think your going to drink too much
- Take small sips, and do this slowly
- Know your limits
- Try having days and weekends without drinking
- Avoid drinking if you have school/uni or work the next day
- Drink low alcohol drinks
- Avoid rounds (or shouts)

Know when drinking is becoming a problem

If you are over 18 years, drinking alcohol occasionally is okay. But when you are drinking often, alcohol can quickly become a problem. The signs of drinking becoming a problem can include:

- Not concentrating, missing and or getting hassled at school and/or work
- Feeling hung over
- Thinking about drinking more often than not
- Feeling on edge
- Having to drink more to feel the alcohol's effects (getting drunk)
- Not being able to stop when you want to

Managing the amount you drink

If your drinking is becoming a problem and you think, or family and friends are suggesting it may be a problem, the best thing to do is seek help and talk to people about it. When trying to reduce the amount you drink, if you have been drinking regularly you may get cravings which can be hard to work through yourself and overcome.

Try speaking with a trusted family member or friend. Otherwise doctors and counsellors can help as well. Check out the finding help section to find services near you.

Source: www.headspace.org.au