

# Alcohol



**Better Health Good Health Care**

**NSW HEALTH**

### What is alcohol?

Alcohol is a drug that slows down the brain and nervous system. It is the most widely used drug in Australia.

Drinking a small amount is not harmful for most people, but regular drinking of a lot of alcohol can cause health, personal and social problems.

### Effects

What alcohol does to you depends on:

- how much you drink
- how quickly you drink it
- your size and weight
- whether you are male or female
- how good your general health is
- how healthy your liver is
- where you drink
- whether you drink alone
- whether you use alcohol with other drugs.

### Immediate effects

Alcohol slows down the messages sent between the brain and the rest of the body. This can make you:

- relax, feel good
- do or say things you normally wouldn't
- feel dizzy, have bad balance
- have trouble controlling how you move (bad coordination)
- react slowly
- have blurred vision (not see clearly)
- slur your words (not speak clearly)
- get angry
- vomit.

Drinking a lot in a short time can cause:

- a hangover
- headaches
- nausea or vomiting
- shakiness
- passing out
- stopping breathing (rare).

Because alcohol affects sight and co-ordination, drinking often causes accidents - especially car crashes and drownings.

### Long-term effects

Drinking a lot of alcohol regularly over time is likely to cause physical, emotional or social problems.

These can include:

- poor diet
- stomach problems
- frequent infections
- skin problems
- liver and brain damage.
- damage to reproductive organs
- memory loss/confusion
- heart and blood disorders
- depression
- relationship problems
- work problems
- money or legal troubles.

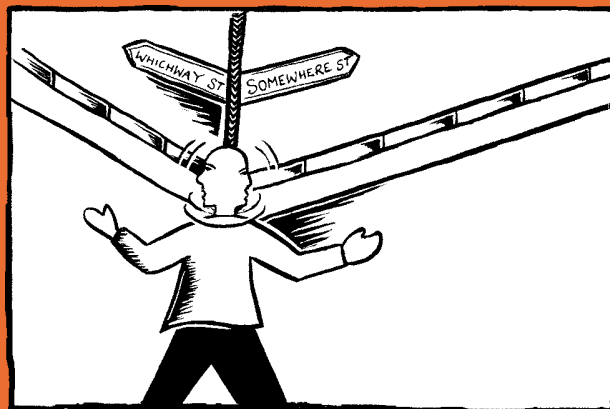
Damage to some body organs can be permanent.

### Mixing alcohol with other drugs

Using alcohol at the same time as any other drug can be dangerous. This includes drinking alcohol while using medicines from the chemist or doctor. One drug can make the negative effects of the other even worse. Alcohol can also stop medicines from working properly.

Mixing alcohol with other drugs that slow down the body (e.g. sleeping pills, heroin, marijuana) can:

- make it harder to think clearly
- make it harder to properly control how you move
- stop your breathing and cause death.



### Tolerance and dependence

Anyone can develop a 'tolerance' to alcohol. Tolerance means that you must drink more to feel the same effects you used to have with lower amounts.

'Dependence' on alcohol means that it takes up much of your thoughts, emotions and activities. Not all people who drink are dependent. Dependent people find it very difficult to stop or reduce drinking. This is because of withdrawal symptoms. These can include:

- anxiety
- sweating
- shaking
- vomiting
- fits
- hallucinations (seeing or hearing things).

### Women and alcohol

Doctors suggest that women should drink less than men. This is because women's body tissue absorbs higher concentration of alcohol than men's.

Women often:

- get drunk more quickly than men
- recover from drinking more slowly than men
- go over the legal driving limit more quickly than men.

### Alcohol and pregnancy

Regular drinking of any alcohol during pregnancy can cause problems for the mother and the baby. Drinking a lot can lead to losing the baby before it is born or the baby being born with foetal alcohol syndrome (slow growth before and after birth, and mental disabilities). Doctors recommend that pregnant women or women trying to get pregnant should not drink alcohol at all.



### Standard Drinks

A 'standard drink' is the measure of alcohol used to work out safe drinking levels.

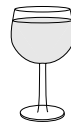
All these drinks (common servings in NSW) are different sizes but each of them has about 10 grams of alcohol. The drinks are different sizes because some are stronger (have more alcohol) than others. Each is one standard drink.



Light Beer  
1 schooner  
425 mL  
2.7% alcohol



Ordinary Beer  
1 middie  
285 mL  
4.9% alcohol



Wine  
1 glass  
100 mL  
12% alcohol



Spirits  
1 nip  
30 mL  
40% alcohol



Port/Sherry  
1 glass  
60 mL  
20% alcohol



## Sensible drinking guidelines

(from: National Health and Medical Research Council)

### for women



STANDARD DRINKS A DAY	LEVEL OF RISK
up to 2	— Low risk
2-4	— Medium risk
more than 4	— Harmful

### for men



STANDARD DRINKS A DAY	LEVEL OF RISK
up to 4	— Low risk
4-6	— Medium risk
more than 6	— Harmful

Everyone should have at least 2 alcohol-free days a week.

### Binge drinking

Binge-drinking means drinking a lot over a few hours - or non-stop over days or weeks. This can be very dangerous as it makes the harms from alcohol worse. Also, because drinking a lot can stop you thinking clearly and acting sensibly, you may put yourself in danger from other things.



### Sobering up

Sobering up, or getting the alcohol out of your body, takes time. A little bit of the alcohol (about 10%) leaves the body in breath, sweat and urine, but most is broken down by the liver.

The liver can only get rid of about one standard drink per hour. Nothing can speed this up - not even black coffee, cold showers, exercise or vomiting.

You can still be over the legal limit even a few hours after your last drink, even if you feel okay.

### Blood alcohol concentration

Blood alcohol concentration (BAC) means how much alcohol is in a person's blood. A breathalyser test measures the amount of alcohol in a person's breath and gives an idea of BAC. The test gives a number, such as .05. A person with a BAC level of .05 has more alcohol in their blood than someone with a level of .02. BAC is determined by how much a person drinks and how long they take to drink it.

### Alcohol and driving

Alcohol is involved in around one-third of all road deaths. There are laws to limit the amount a person can drink before driving.

In Australia, the legal limit for drinking and driving for most people is .05 BAC.

In NSW the limit is .02 for:

- L- and P-plate drivers
- drivers under 25 for their first three years of driving [if starting with P-plates]
- drivers of heavy vehicles (like trucks), public passenger vehicles (like buses) and dangerous goods vehicles (like trucks carrying chemicals).



It is difficult to work out how many drinks will put a person over the legal drink-driving limits. Some people will reach higher BAC more quickly, including:

- women
- people who are not healthy
- people with an empty stomach
- people with smaller bodies
- overweight people.

If your legal limit is .05 a good guide is:

- two standard drinks in the first hour and then one per hour after that.

If your legal limit is .02 a good guide is:

- avoid drinking at all before driving, as just one standard drink could be enough to put you over the limit.

If you drink more than this and drive, then you are breaking the law and could lose your licence, get a fine or go to prison. Any drink-driver who injures or kills someone can be sent to prison.

### Alcohol and the law

It is illegal to sell alcohol to – or get it for - anyone under 18.

It is also illegal to sell alcohol to someone who is already drunk.

It is an offence to drink or carry alcohol in an alcohol-free zone.

### Self-help associations

**Alcoholics Anonymous (AA)** – a self help organisation for people with alcohol problems. Phone the General Service Office of Alcoholics Anonymous on (02) 9663 1206 to find the nearest local AA in your state.

**Al-Anon** - a self help organisation for family, relatives and friends of people with alcohol problems. Phone the General Service Office of Al-Anon on (03) 9629 8327 (Monday-Wednesday) to find the nearest local Al-Anon in your state.

**24 hour confidential telephone counselling service**

**NSW**

Alcohol and Drug Information Service (ADIS)  
Ph: (02) 9361 2111 Toll free: 1800 422 599

**Victoria**

Direct Line Ph: (03) 9416 1818  
Toll free: 1800 136 385

**Western Australia**

Alcohol and Drug Information Service (ADIS)  
Ph: (08) 9442 5000 Toll free: 1800 198 024

**Queensland**

Alcohol and Drug Information Service (ADIS)  
Ph: (07) 3236 2414 Toll free: 1800 177 833

**South Australia**

Alcohol and Drug Information Service (ADIS)  
Toll free: 1300 131 340

**Northern Territory**

Amity Community Service  
Ph: (08) 8981 8030 Toll free: 1800 629 683

**Tasmania**

Alcohol and Drug Information Service  
Toll free number: 1800 811 994

**ACT**

24 hour Alcohol and Drug Help line  
Ph: (02) 6205 4545



The information in this document can be accessed through the NSW HealthWeb site: [www.health.nsw.gov.au](http://www.health.nsw.gov.au) or directly viewed from CEIDA's website: [www.ceida.net.au](http://www.ceida.net.au).

Further copies are available from CEIDA by phoning (02) 9818 0444.

Other publications in this series include *Marijuana, Cocaine*.

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