

## Plain English summary

# Reducing health risks from drinking alcohol

Alcohol is the most widely used drug in Australia. About 8 in 10 Australian adults drink alcohol. People drink alcohol for a wide range of reasons and in different social and cultural contexts. Alcohol can cause harm to the person who drinks and sometimes to others around them.

Based on the most current scientific evidence, the *Australian guidelines to reduce health risks from drinking alcohol* inform Australians of the health risks of drinking alcohol and provide advice on how to keep these risks low. They help people choose how much alcohol they drink, if any.

## What is 'a drink'?

A standard drink contains 10 grams of pure alcohol. The type of alcohol makes no difference, 10 grams of alcohol is 10 grams of alcohol, whether it is in beer, wine or spirits. It does not matter whether it is mixed with soft drink, fruit juice, water or ice.



**LIGHT  
BEER**

425 ml | 2.7% alc/vol



**MID STRENGTH  
BEER**

375 ml | 3.5% alc/vol



**FULL STRENGTH  
BEER**

285 ml | 4.9% alc/vol



**REGULAR  
CIDER**

285 ml | 4.9% alc/vol



**SPARKLING WINE**

100 ml | 13% alc/vol



**WINE**

100 ml | 13% alc/vol



**FORTIFIED WINE**

(e.g. sherry, port)  
60 ml | 20% alc/vol



**SPIRITS**

(e.g. vodka, gin, rum, whiskey)  
30 ml | 40% alc/vol

The standard drink is defined in the Australia and New Zealand Food Standards Code.

## 1: Adults

**To reduce the risk of harm from alcohol-related disease or injury, healthy men and women should drink no more than 10 standard drinks a week and no more than 4 standard drinks on any one day. The less you drink, the lower your risk of harm from alcohol.**

Following this guideline keeps the risk of harm from alcohol low, but it does not remove all risk.

If healthy adults were to follow this advice, they would have less than a 1 in 100 chance of dying from an alcohol-related condition. The risk rises the more a person drinks. It is reduced by drinking less often and drinking less on each occasion.

### Reasons for this advice:

- Drinking alcohol increases the risk of many cancers, including bowel and breast cancer. Alcohol can also damage the liver and cause high blood pressure. The level of risk increases as more alcohol is consumed.
- When people drink alcohol they have a greater chance of getting hurt and hurting other people, for example through car accidents, falls or getting into arguments.
- Drinking alcohol can cause mental health problems or make these problems worse.
- In the past, low levels of alcohol were thought likely to protect against heart disease. The evidence is now less clear.

There are some people who are at greater risk of harm from alcohol. These people include:

- adults aged 18–25 years, as alcohol increases the risk of injury and affects brain development
- people aged over 60 years, due to changes to body composition and their ability to process alcohol and in some cases chronic health conditions
- people with a family history of problems with alcohol who may be at greater risk than other people of developing problems with alcohol themselves
- people who use illicit drugs or take medications that interact with alcohol
- people with conditions that can be made worse by alcohol, such as liver disease, hepatitis B and C, obesity or mental health conditions.

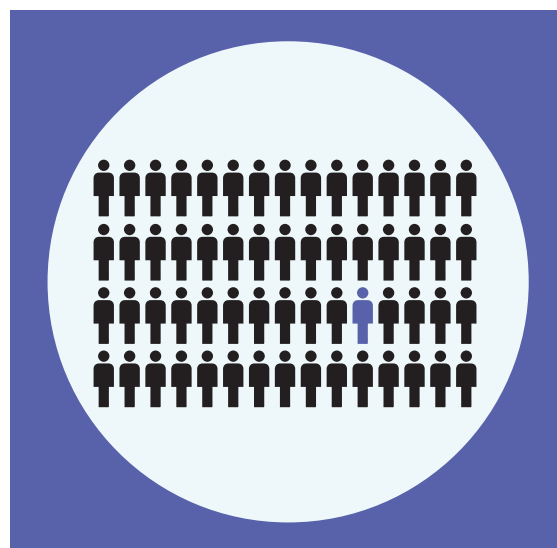
People should talk to their doctor if they have questions about how drinking alcohol may be affecting their health.

### When less is better

There are times when drinking alcohol can increase the risk of harm. The risk increases even if the amounts are small, for example:

- driving a vehicle
- riding a motorbike or bicycle
- using machinery or other activities that need concentration
- boating, fishing, swimming or other activities on and around the water
- supervising children or when you are responsible for the safety of others
- using certain medicines or drugs.

**1 in 100** Healthy adults drinking within the guideline recommendation have less than a 1 in 100 chance of dying from an alcohol-related condition.



## 2: Children and people under 18 years of age

### **To reduce the risk of injury and other harms to health, children and people under 18 years of age should not drink alcohol.**

People under 18 years of age are more likely to suffer harm from alcohol.

- The brain continues to develop until around 25 years of age. This means the brains of people under 18 are more sensitive to damage from alcohol.
- Drinking alcohol can increase risk taking and lead to unsafe sex, car accidents and injuries. It can also increase the risk of self-harm and, in some instances, suicide.
- Drinking alcohol at an early age may increase the risk of developing problems with alcohol, which can appear in early adulthood.

## 3: Women who are pregnant or breastfeeding

### **Advice for pregnancy**

#### **To prevent harm from alcohol to their unborn child, women who are pregnant or planning a pregnancy should not drink alcohol.**

No safe level of alcohol consumption during pregnancy has been identified.

- When a woman drinks alcohol during pregnancy, so does the developing baby. The baby's blood gets about the same level of alcohol as the mother's blood.
- A baby's brain starts growing very early in pregnancy, often before the mother knows she is pregnant. Drinking alcohol in pregnancy can damage the baby's brain which can cause fetal alcohol spectrum disorder (FASD). FASD leads to many lifelong problems including learning and behavioural issues during childhood and adult life.
- The risk of harm to a baby increases the more alcohol a mother consumes, and the more frequently she drinks. It does not mean the developing baby will always be harmed if a woman drinks while pregnant. Every pregnancy is different and there are a range of factors that play a role in determining the risk.

### **Advice for breastfeeding**

#### **For women who are breastfeeding, not drinking alcohol is safest for their baby.**

- If a mother drinks when she is breastfeeding, the alcohol crosses into the breastmilk.
- If a mother breastfeeds her baby while there is still alcohol in her breastmilk, the baby also drinks the alcohol.
- When a mother drinks alcohol while breastfeeding, the baby can have problems feeding and sleeping.
- A baby's brain keeps developing after it is born. This means an infant's brain is more sensitive to damage from alcohol than an adult brain.

## How the Guidelines were developed

Australia's National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) provides evidence-based advice to government and the community on a wide range of matters including nutrition, infant feeding, infection control, blood lead levels and drinking water quality.

The *Australian guidelines to reduce health risks from drinking alcohol* are based on a thorough evaluation of the evidence, and guided by a group of independent health experts including doctors, medical and public health professionals, researchers and consumer representatives.

The guidelines summarise the evidence and methods that guided this review, and the conclusions drawn by NHMRC's expert committee.