

SHORT TERM HEALTH RISKS

AUSTRALIAN ALCOHOL GUIDELINES – FACT SHEET

Males: risk of acute harm in the short term measured by standard drinks

- Low risk: on any one day up to 6 standard drinks
- Risky: on any one day 7 to 10 standard drinks
- High risk: on any one day 11 or more standard drinks

Females: risk of acute harm in the short term measured by standard drinks

- Low risk: on any one day up to 4 standard drinks
- Risky: on any one day 5 to 6 standard drinks
- High risk: on any one day 7 or more standard drinks

Alcohol has a range of short-term health risks

Health risks from excessive drinking on a single day include: risk taking behaviour, accidents, falls, injury and death, as consequences of the brain's reduced control over reaction time, co-ordination, thinking and speech, and—at highest levels—all systems of the body, leading to unconsciousness; some types of heart problems and stroke, by affecting heart rate, blood pressure and blood flow; gut irritation and diarrhoea; inflamed pancreas; sexual problems; suicidal behaviour; interacting with stress in some situations; aggravating sleep disorders and affecting sleep patterns.

Recent studies show that injury and death due to trauma are amongst the most important consequences of alcohol misuse. Drinking alcohol has been associated with risk of injury in many settings, including vehicle and cycling accidents, incidents involving pedestrians, falls, fires, land and water sports and recreational activities, and violence.

Alcohol related injury and violence

Risk of injury starts to increase at relatively low levels of intake and it increases as the level of intake increases. The risk increases more for people whose level of alcohol consumption varies significantly from time to time and the risk is highest for those who occasionally drink much more than their usual amount.

- Alcohol is the major cause of road injury. Between 1991-97, 31% of all driver and pedestrian deaths on Australian roads were alcohol related.
- Alcohol is a major contributing cause of violence in Australia. In 1998/99, it was estimated that there were 8,661 hospitalisations (4.6 per 10,000 people) for alcohol caused assaults, of whom 74% were male and 64% were aged 15-34 years.
- Alcohol is an added risk factor for injury and death during activities such as swimming, diving, surfing, boating, water skiing and fishing, and accounts for 32% of drownings in males aged 15-29.
- Alcohol is involved, in varying ways, in about 50% of cases of domestic violence and sexual violence.

Alcohol and cognitive function

Very low levels of alcohol can affect judgement and performance. Risk is higher where there are physical hazards or the person is required to perform complex reasoning and physical tasks.

When blood alcohol levels are raised, recent studies have also indicated that in areas such as cognitive function, attention span and reaction time, substantial impairment can exist well after alcohol has been metabolised and passed from the body—a result of 'hangover' effect.

Ways of reducing the harm from drinking

- Alcohol should not be consumed for at least several hours before undertaking potentially risky activities, for example: driving, swimming or boating.
- Alternate alcoholic and non-alcoholic drinks, eating while drinking, staying with friends rather than driving, and not accepting lifts with a drunk driver
- Weigh any potential benefits of alcohol against increased risk-taking, loss of inhibitions, reduced decision-making skills, overdose related to low tolerance, and the increased risk of accidents, violence and unwanted sexual activity.

For more information contact John Noble, Media Unit on 0413 890 241.