

Harms Associated with Alcohol

Two main patterns of alcohol misuse create a risk of harmful consequences for the drinker, and/or by the drinker:

- **Excessive drinking on a particular occasion or day:** This can result in immediate or short term harm from “problems of intoxication” or binge drinking, such as alcohol-related violence, risky behaviours, road accidents, and falls; and
- **Consistent high-level drinking over months and years:** As well as short term harm on any one occasion of drinking, this can also result in long term physical and mental health problems, such as cirrhosis of the liver, cancer, heart and vascular disorders, memory problems, and alcohol dependence, as well as social consequences that can affect drinkers, their families and local communities.

The chances of harmful effects from alcohol are increased when it is consumed:

- Above the guidelines set by the NHMRC, and/or
- In the presence of other risk factors, such as medications, drugs, and risky activities such as driving or operating machinery; and/or
- By people who are at greater risk because of their age, size, sex or other condition that makes them more vulnerable to the effects of alcohol.

This fact sheet:

- summarises the main short and long term health consequences of alcohol misuse in the Table below. The fact sheets listed over the page provide more detailed information about these consequences;
- describes the main social consequences of alcohol misuse; and
- treats alcohol-related violence as a social consequence that can lead to health consequences.

Short term health consequences

[risks from excessive drinking on a single day]

Harms to physical health:

- 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.

Harms to mental health:

- suicidal behaviour;
- interacting with stress in some situations;
- aggravating sleep disorders.

Long term health consequences

[risks from regular excessive drinking]

Harms to physical health:

- cirrhosis of the liver;
- cancer, especially of the mouth, throat and oesophagus;
- range of diseases affecting the heart and blood, and including stroke and hypertension;
- problems with the nerves of the arms and legs;
- harm to the unborn baby;
- sexual problems, especially male impotence.

Harms to mental health:

- alcohol dependence;
- problems with memory and reasoning;
- alcohol related brain injury.



Research into the consequences of alcohol misuse

Most of the alcohol-related research that has been carried out to date has been on its effects on health and the body. However, in addition to the health problems resulting from alcohol, certain patterns of drinking have social consequences that affect many members of the community from time to time. These consequences can be difficult to document and to measure, and more research is needed about them.

What is known about the social consequences of alcohol misuse

Immediate or short term consequences for people who drink alcohol above guideline limits:

- range from minor acts of vandalism or offensive behaviour to far more serious anti-social behaviour which can result in affront, violence or injury to others, including bystanders;
- include placing themselves at increased risk of such assaults, as well as coercive sexual activity and/or unprotected intercourse (particularly among adolescents), fights and violence, and road trauma.

Problem drinking can have major consequences for family, friends and the community, for example:

- Drinking may result in the income available for basic household expenses being reduced substantially.
- Members of the drinker's family are often isolated, with little understanding or support from others. This may lead to anxiety, depression and ill-health. Their needs are often neither recognised nor supported by the social and health care support systems.
- Alcohol-related problems in succeeding generations of the one family are not uncommon, with social learning as a major – and often the sole – determining factor, as many inappropriate and harmful patterns of drinking are learned within a family.

- Alcohol is involved, in varying ways, in about 50% of cases of domestic physical and sexual violence.
- Women who have alcohol problems often also have marital problems, and are less confident about resolving marital disagreements.

Other relevant Fact Sheets:

- *What is a standard drink?*
- *Alcohol and medications*
- *Alcohol and drugs*
- *The effects of alcohol on the body*
- *Alcohol and the law*
- *Alcohol and young people*
- *Alcohol and young adults*
- *Alcohol and older people*
- *Alcohol and women's health*
- *Alcohol and men's health*
- *Alcohol and pregnancy*
- *Alcohol and mental health*
- *Alcohol dependence*
- *Alcohol and injury*
- *Alcohol and heart disease*
- *Alcohol and cancer*

Principal source

National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) (2001). *Australian Alcohol Guidelines: Health Risks and Benefits*. NHMRC, Canberra.

Other sources

Laslett A, Donath S, and Dietze P (2002). Long term consequences of alcohol consumption. *National Alcohol Research Agenda*. Commonwealth Department of Health and Ageing, Canberra.

