

# ALCOHOL AND WOMEN'S HEALTH

## AUSTRALIAN ALCOHOL GUIDELINES – FACT SHEET

### ***Guidelines for women***

To minimise risks in the short and longer term, and to gain any longer-term benefits, the alcohol guidelines for women have been set by the NHMRC at:

- ❑ No more than 2 standard drinks a day *on average*;
- ❑ And no more than 4 standard drinks on *any one day*.
- ❑ One or two alcohol-free days a week.

### ***Body size and type***

Women, because of their size, body type, and the way their bodies process alcohol, are more quickly affected by alcohol than men are, and are more vulnerable to both the acute and chronic effects of alcohol misuse. Women's smaller liver size means that at lower levels of drinking, they are vulnerable to liver damage and cirrhosis, as well as to the risk of death from alcoholic liver cirrhosis. The culture of 'thinness' and dieting that particularly affects young women, also places them at a higher risk of the effects of alcohol.

### ***Breast cancer***

Alcohol increases women's risk of breast cancer, and the risk rises with the level of alcohol consumed. While more research is needed to explain the links, it has been found that compared with women who drink little or no alcohol, the risk of breast cancer is 35% higher in women who drink 3-4 standard drinks a day, and 67% with more than 4 standard drinks a day.

### ***Pregnancy and breastfeeding***

The alcohol in the blood stream of a pregnant woman enters that of her unborn child, and, in sufficient quantities, this can cause problems for the unborn child. The first few weeks after conception are the most vulnerable period. Heavy drinking episodes and occasional intoxication may increase the risk of miscarriage, low birth weight, cognitive defects (affecting one or more abilities such as attention, intelligence, language, and memory) and congenital abnormalities.

Alcohol in the bloodstream passes into breast milk. Some practitioners report that, even at relatively low levels of drinking, it may reduce the amount of milk available and cause irritability, poor feeding and sleep disturbances in the infant.

### ***Alcohol-related injury and death***

Recent Australian research has demonstrated that women have an enhanced risk of sustaining an injury after drinking.

The main cause of female alcohol-related deaths are stroke and fall injuries, followed by alcoholic liver cirrhosis, road injury, breast cancer and alcohol dependence. Drinking 4-5 standard drinks per day increases the risk of death by up to 40% higher than that of non-drinkers. Approximately 2% of female deaths are alcohol-related.

Alcohol is involved, in varying ways, in about 50% of cases of domestic physical and sexual violence.

### ***Potential health benefits***

The guidelines point to some health benefits of drinking small amounts of alcohol for middle-aged and older people. These include reducing the risk of heart disease. However, a combination of approaches, including exercise, improving diet and stopping smoking, achieves better results than drinking alone. People who choose not to drink alcohol should not be urged to drink to gain any potential health benefit.

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