

# ALCOHOL: THE FACTS

## WHAT IS ALCOHOL?

Alcohol is a drug that acts as a depressant and 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 excessive drinking on any one occasion can cause health, personal and social problems.

## ALCOHOL RELATED EMERGENCY

If you can't wake someone up or you are concerned that they may have sustained a head injury from an alcohol related fall – call an ambulance immediately – dial **Triple Zero (000)**.

If the person has been mixing drugs and alcohol, tell the NSW Ambulance paramedic exactly what they have taken. Paramedics are there to help. Generally paramedics don't involve the police **unless** there is danger to themselves or other people/children, someone dies, or a crime (such as violence or theft) has been committed.

## EFFECTS OF ALCOHOL

The effects of alcohol depend 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 including medications
- if there is a family history of alcohol and other drug dependence.

### 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
- get angry
- depressed

- vomit
- have blurred vision (not see clearly)
- slur your words (not speak clearly).

Drinking a lot in a short time can cause:

- headaches
- nausea or vomiting
- tiredness
- sensitivity to noise and light
- dry mouth
- diarrhoea
- poor sleep
- trouble concentrating
- shakiness
- drowsiness
- passing out
- blackouts (temporary loss of memory)
- alcohol poisoning
- stopping breathing (rare)
- coma (rare)
- death (rare).

Because alcohol affects judgement, sight and co-ordination drinking often causes accidents – especially falls, car crashes and drowning.

Alcohol misuse is a major contributing factor in assaults and other violent crimes.

### LONG-TERM EFFECTS

Drinking a lot of alcohol regularly over time is likely to cause problems for your physical, emotional and social health. Damage to some body organs can be chronic and permanent. It can also affect your long term wellbeing by interfering in your work and study and cost you a lot of money. It may impair your capacity as a parent/primary carer of children. Problems can include:

- poor diet
- stomach problems
- frequent infections
- skin problems
- liver and brain damage
- diabetes
- damage to reproductive organs
- memory loss/confusion
- heart and blood disorders
- depression
- relationship problems
- work problems
- increased risk of dementia
- increased risk of some cancers
- money, legal troubles
- dependence
- sleep problems.

## MIXING 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 (eg sleeping pills, heroin, cannabis, methadone, buprenorphine) can:

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

## DRINK SPIKING

Drink spiking is when a person deliberately adds more alcohol (eg. double/triple shot) or a drug (eg.GHB, benzodiazepines) to another person's drink without their knowledge – this could make the person become intoxicated unexpectedly. Drinks are spiked for amusement, to facilitate sexual assault, rape or theft.

If your drink has been spiked:

- ask someone you trust to get you to a safe place
- visit a hospital or your doctor ASAP to test for the presence of drugs.

If you feel unwell or suspect that you have been sexually assaulted then call an ambulance or go to the nearest NSW Health Sexual Assault service or Emergency Department.

Drink spiking is serious and illegal. To prevent drink spiking, it may be best to watch your drink, avoid sharing drinks, buy/pour your own drink and don't accept drinks from people you don't know well or trust.

## TOLERANCE AND DEPENDENCE

Anyone drinking regularly 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, which can include:

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

If you are experiencing problems with withdrawal, contact your doctor or health centre.

## PREGNANCY AND BREASTFEEDING

The safest option for women who are trying to get pregnant, who are pregnant or who are breastfeeding is to not drink alcohol.

Drinking alcohol during pregnancy increases the risk of miscarriage, stillbirth, and perinatal death. It may also cause fetal alcohol spectrum disorder (FASD) in the unborn baby, a condition leading to developmental defects (slow growth before and after birth, and permanent mental, behavioural and learning disabilities). Inform antenatal staff of alcohol use and attend regular antenatal checkups.

After birth, the babies of alcohol dependent mothers can suffer withdrawal symptoms, including tremors, irritability and fits.

According to the Australian **National Health and Medical Research Council Guidelines**,

- For women who are pregnant or planning a pregnancy, **not drinking** is the safest option.
- For women who are breastfeeding, **not drinking** is the safest option.

Alcohol in the mother's bloodstream passes into breast milk. It can reduce the milk supply, and can cause irritability, poor feeding, sleep disturbance, and poor psychomotor development in the baby.

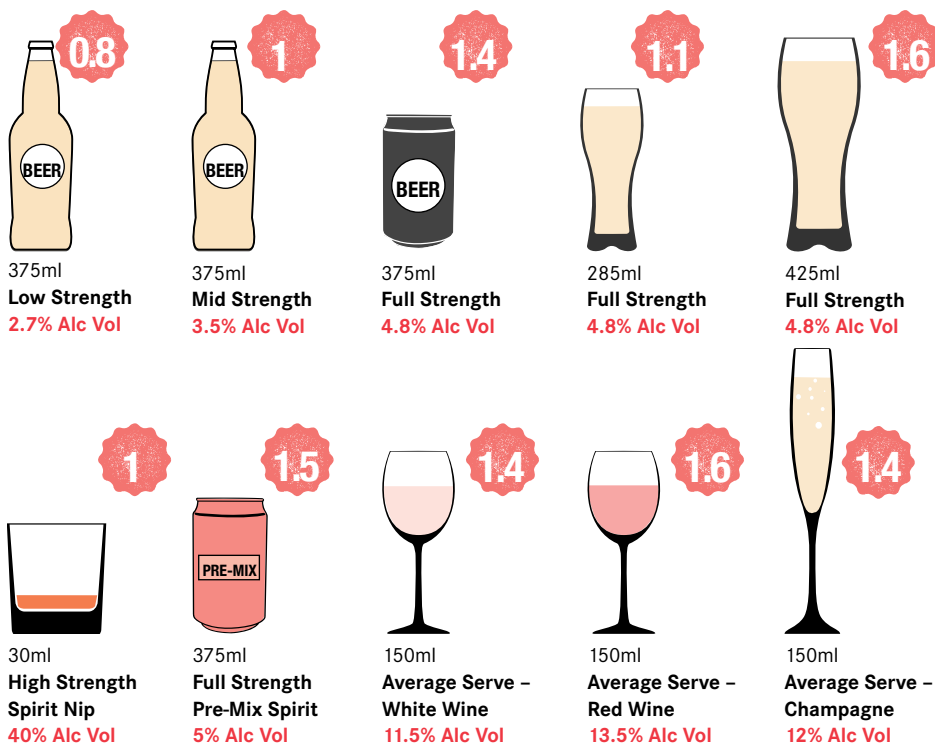
It is generally risky to take any drug while breastfeeding without medical advice.

For more information about alcohol and pregnancy, go to: <http://www.alcohol.gov.au/internet/alcohol/publishing.nsf/Content/wwtk-hp-leaflet>

## AUSTRALIAN STANDARD DRINKS

The amount of alcohol in a can, bottle or glass of an alcoholic drink is often expressed as standard drinks. This term helps people to measure the amount of alcohol they consume and to drink at safe levels. A standard drink in Australia contains 10g of alcohol. For example, a 700ml bottle of spirits, like vodka, contains approximately 220g of alcohol or 22 standard drinks. A serving of alcohol in a pub or club is often larger than a 'standard' drink, for example a standard glass of wine is 100ml but a typical serve may be 150ml.

To view the alcoholic content of a larger range of alcoholic drinks go to: Your room Standard Drink Calculator at [www.yourroom.com.au](http://www.yourroom.com.au)



## GUIDELINES FOR REDUCING HEALTH RISKS

The Australian Alcohol Guidelines (2020) recommend:

- Healthy adults should drink no more than 10 standard drinks a week and no more than 4 standard drinks on any one day to reduce the risk of harm from alcohol. The less you drink the lower your risk of harm.
- Children and people under 18 years of age should not drink alcohol.
- Women who are pregnant or breastfeeding should not drink alcohol to prevent harm from alcohol to their unborn child or baby.

For more information on the guidelines go to [www.nhmrc.gov.au](http://www.nhmrc.gov.au)

## BINGE DRINKING

Binge drinking can refer to either occasional bouts of heavy drinking, or a 'bender' which may last for days or weeks. Studies have shown an increased likelihood of acute harm such as accident and injury, when drinking in this manner.

It takes time for alcohol to reach the brain. By the time you feel the effects of the first drink you could be on your second or third. You may be drunker than you think. Drink slowly, monitor how many drinks you've had and drink something non-alcoholic in between.

The fun of drinking can turn nasty really quickly – slurred speech, blurry vision and bad coordination. Things you regret like unsafe sex, fights and vomiting in public can happen when you're drunk. You can also get a hangover that lasts all the next day.

Drinking alcohol before you are 18 can affect your brain development and make it harder to learn and remember things in the future.

## SOBERING UP

Sobering up, or getting the alcohol out of your body, takes time. Just about 10% of alcohol 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.**

Don't assume it's safe to drive the morning after drinking – especially after a binge.

## THE LAW

It is illegal to sell alcohol to – or get alcohol for – anyone under 18 years old. Also unless you are a parent or a guardian, you commit an offence if you give alcohol to anyone who is under 18 years old.

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

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

The NSW Government has strong laws to reduce alcohol-related harm across NSW. These laws include a new disciplinary scheme, 3.30am 'last drinks' provisions and a 12pm (state-wide) ban on takeaway alcohol sales. There are also special conditions in the Sydney CBD and Kings Cross entertainment precincts, which include incident registers, per-person drink limits and identity scanners.

For more information go to:  
[www.nsw.gov.au/newlaws](http://www.nsw.gov.au/newlaws)

## BLOOD ALCOHOL CONCENTRATION AND DRIVING

If you drink and drive over your legal drink-driving limit, you are breaking the law and could lose your licence, get a fine or go to prison. The drink-driving limit refers to the amount of alcohol in the bloodstream or blood alcohol concentration (BAC), which is measured in grams per 100ml.

In Australia, the legal limit for drinking and driving for most people is 0.05 BAC.

In NSW there are three blood alcohol limits:

### Zero applies to:

- ALL learner drivers.
- ALL Provisional 1 drivers.
- ALL Provisional 2 drivers.
- ALL visiting drivers holding an overseas or interstate learner, provisional or equivalent licence.

### Under 0.02 applies to:

- Drivers of vehicles of "gross vehicle mass" greater than 13.9 tonnes.

- Drivers of vehicles carrying dangerous goods.
- Drivers of public vehicles such as taxi or bus drivers.

A BAC of 0.02 can be reached after the consumption of only one standard drink (a middy of beer, a nip of spirits or a small glass of wine). This means that drivers subject to a 0.02 limit should not consume any alcohol before driving.

### Under 0.05 applies to:

- ALL other licences (including overseas and interstate licence holders) not subject to a 0.02 or zero limit.

Alcohol is involved in around one-third of all road deaths. Anyone under the influence of alcohol who kills or injures another person while driving can be sentenced to a term in prison.

## SELF-HELP ASSOCIATIONS

**Alcoholics Anonymous (AA)** is a self help organisation to help people abstain from alcohol.

Phone the national helpline number **1300 22 22 22** and your call will be connected to your nearest local AA in your state or visit: [www.aa.org.au](http://www.aa.org.au)

**Al-Anon Family Groups** is a self help organisation for family, relatives and friends of people with alcohol problems. Call the Help line: **1300 ALANON** or **1300 252 666** (for the cost of a local call) or visit: [www.al-anon.alateen.org/australia](http://www.al-anon.alateen.org/australia)

**Smart Recovery**, a voluntary self-help group that assists people in recovering from alcohol, drug use and other addictive behaviours. Visit [www.smartrecoveryaustralia.com.au](http://www.smartrecoveryaustralia.com.au)

## INFORMATION AND ADVICE

For free and confidential advice about alcohol and other drugs 24 hours, 7 days a week, call the **National Alcohol and Other Drug hotline: 1800 250 015**.

It will automatically direct you to the Alcohol and Drug Information Service in the state or territory you are calling from.

**Aboriginal Health and Medical Research Council** provides links to Aboriginal community controlled health services across NSW. Visit [www.ahmrc.org.au](http://www.ahmrc.org.au) for information about AHMRC members including a regional map, information and links to members websites.

[www.alcohol.gov.au](http://www.alcohol.gov.au) provides information about related health issues and Australian government policy.

**Drug and Alcohol Multicultural Education Centre (DAMEC)** provides services for people from culturally and linguistically diverse communities. Contact DAMEC on (02) 8113 1301 or for counselling and support services for CALD communities call (02) 8706 0150.

**Drug Info** provides facts and resources on alcohol and other drugs and the prevention of related harm. Visit [www.druginfo.adf.org.au](http://www.druginfo.adf.org.au)

**State Library of New South Wales Drug Info** provides up to date information on alcohol and other drugs in public libraries throughout NSW. Visit [www.druginfo.sl.nsw.gov.au](http://www.druginfo.sl.nsw.gov.au)

**eheadspace** provides mental health and wellbeing support, information and services for young people (12 – 25 years) and their family and friends. Visit [www.eheadspace.org.au](http://www.eheadspace.org.au)

**Family Drug Support** provides 24-7 telephone support to families in crisis due to drug and alcohol issues. Call the Helpline on 1300 368 186 or visit the website at [www.fds.org.au](http://www.fds.org.au)

**Kids Helpline** is a free, 24 hour counselling service for young people aged 5 to 25 years. Counselling is offered via the Kids Helpline website [www.kidshelp.com.au](http://www.kidshelp.com.au) or email, or call 1800 55 1800.

**Nepean Youth Drug and Alcohol Service (NYDAS)** works within a holistic model of care to address a range of issues for young people (12 – 20 years of age) related to their alcohol and other drug use. Call (02) 4734 2129 or (02) 4734 1333.

**NSW Poisons Information Centre** provides the latest poisons information to the public, and toxicology advice to health professionals on the management of poisoned and envenomed patients. Telephone advice is available 24/7 on **131126** from anywhere in Australia.

**NSW Users and AIDS Association (NUAA)** is a peak drug user organisation in NSW providing harm reduction information and blood borne virus prevention peer education. Visit [www.nuaa.org.au](http://www.nuaa.org.au)

**ReachOut** is an Australian online youth mental health service with a mobile-friendly site and forums where you can access help, information and support. Visit [au.reachout.com](http://au.reachout.com)

**Sexual Health Info Link** provides free and confidential sexual health support and information. Visit [www.shil.nsw.gov.au](http://www.shil.nsw.gov.au)

**TAFE NSW** provides help with education, career development or personal matters. Students can contact a local TAFE/university counsellor. Visit [www.tafensw.edu.au](http://www.tafensw.edu.au)

[www.yourchoiceonline.com.au](http://www.yourchoiceonline.com.au) is an alcohol education program that aims to challenge perceptions about underage drinking and excessive consumption of alcohol and to educate young people about the health, legal and social consequences of drinking.

**Youth Action** is the peak organisation for young people in NSW. Visit [www.youthaction.org.au](http://www.youthaction.org.au) and use the search option to access a directory of NSW youth services.

**Youth Solutions** provides services for young people 12 to 25 years of age and the community including prevention and health promotion, drug and alcohol education, community programs and information and referral. Visit [www.youthsolutions.com.au](http://www.youthsolutions.com.au) or call (02) 4628 2319 [provides services to young people in Macarthur and Wingecarribee].

**NSW Health aims to reduce drug-related harm for individuals and the community by providing the facts, including the possible health, social and economic consequences of using alcohol and other drugs.**

A range of drug and alcohol fact sheets is available for download at: [www.yourroom.health.nsw.gov.au](http://www.yourroom.health.nsw.gov.au)

