

## ALCOHOL FACT SHEET

### What is alcohol?

- Alcohol is a drug that affects the way people think, feel and behave. It is the most widely used psychoactive, or mood-changing, recreational drug in Australia.
- Alcohol is often mistakenly believed to be a stimulant. This is because drinking a small amount of alcohol may initially reduce tension or inhibitions, making a person feel more relaxed or excited. For this reason, people often drink alcohol at social occasions. However, alcohol is actually a central nervous system depressant that affects almost all a person's cells and systems. Increasing alcohol concentrations in the body inhibits many of the brain's functions, dampening the motor and sensory centres, and rapidly making judgement, coordination and balance more difficult, and slowing one's reflexes.
- The liver is the main organ of the body responsible for removing alcohol from the bloodstream. The liver can only work at a fixed rate, taking about an hour to break down the alcohol in a standard drink. 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.

### What is alcohol dependence?

- People who drink heavily may become dependent on alcohol. There are degrees of dependence, from mild dependency to compulsive drinking (often referred to as 'alcoholism'). Alcohol dependence can be a physical problem, or psychological, or both. For instance, to some degree many of us are psychologically dependent on alcohol if we feel that we cannot socialise at a party without a drink.
- When an individual consumes alcohol steadily over a long period, physiological processes gradually change so that the body can still function more or less normally despite the effects of alcohol. Subsequently, the body can only function properly when the alcohol is present.
- When someone who is dependant on alcohol stops drinking, usually the symptoms of withdrawal become evident. These can be mild to severe and include the following: sweating, tremors, heart palpitations, increased body temperature, feelings of anxiety and agitation, and in severe cases hallucinations and loss of orientation. The symptoms of withdrawal can be present for up to months even when abstinent this whole period.
- Individuals experience many different kinds of both short- and long-term problems around their consumption of alcohol. If left untreated, it can lead to permanent mental, physical and social harms. These problems could range from the mild to severe.

## **What are the short-term effects of alcohol?**

The short-term effects of using alcohol may include:

- Relaxation
- Reduced concentration
- Lack of co-ordination and slower reflexes
- Loss of inhibitions and more confidence
- Flushed appearance
- Blurred vision and slurred speech
- Intense moods, e.g. aggression, elation, depression
- Headache
- Gut irritation and diarrhoea
- Nausea, vomiting, sleep
- Sexual problems
- Suicidal behaviour
- At high doses – coma and death

## **What are the long-term effects of alcohol?**

Drinking a lot of alcohol regularly over time is likely to cause physical, emotional or social problems. These may include:

- Poor diet
- Stomach problems
- Frequent infections
- Skin problems
- Liver, heart and brain damage
- Sexual impotence and a reduction in fertility
- Concentration and short-term memory problems
- Depression
- Family and relationship problems
- Poor work performance
- Legal and financial difficulties

Damage to some body organs can be permanent. 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.

## **What is a Standard Drink?**

In Australia, the use of standard drink sizes have been designed to help people monitor their alcohol consumption and exercise control over the amount they drink. Different types of alcoholic drinks contain different amounts of pure alcohol. A standard drink is defined as one that contains **10 grams** of pure alcohol.

The following are all equal to approximately one standard drink:

- one 425ml glass (a schooner) of light beer (2.7% alcohol)
- one 285ml glass (a middy) of regular beer (4.9% alcohol)
- one 100ml glass of wine (12% alcohol)
- one 30ml nip of spirits (40% alcohol)
- one 60ml glass of port or sherry (20% alcohol)

It is important to remember that the 'standard' size of drinks served in some hotels, or at home may be bigger than the standard drinks you are used to. Large wine glasses can hold two standard drinks or even more! In addition, cocktails can contain as many as five or six standard drinks, depending on the recipe.

### **Is there a safe drinking level?**

Australian Guidelines to reduce health risks from drinking alcohol recommend the following:

- The lifetime risk of harm from drinking alcohol increases with the amount consumed. For healthy men and women, drinking no more than two standard drinks on any day reduces the lifetime risk of harm from alcohol-related disease or injury.
- On a single occasion of drinking, the risk of alcohol-related injury increases with the amount consumed. For example, if a 35-year old man consumes 3 standard drinks on one occasion; his risk of dying in a road traffic accident is 3.8 times greater than if he had not been drinking. For healthy men and women, drinking no more than four standard drinks on a single occasion reduces the risk of alcohol related injury arising from that occasion.

**Source:**

National Drug & Alcohol Research Centre – <http://ndarc.med.unsw.edu.au/>  
Sydney Alcohol Treatment Group – <http://www.alcpharm.med.usyd.edu.au/>