

Number 1.10 revised June 2009  
For general audience

## The facts about binge drinking

### What is binge drinking?

Drinking alcohol is the most common type of drug use in Australia. Alcohol is so widely used that many people don't think of it as a drug and may not realise that it can be harmful. As a result, they may drink too heavily at times, or binge drink.

The term "binge drinking" can have different meanings, but generally it refers to drinking heavily over a short period of time with the intention of becoming intoxicated, resulting in immediate and severe intoxication.

### How is binge drinking harmful?

Binge drinking can be harmful in a number of ways:

- ▶ **Short-term harms** can be those that are immediately harmful to your health. For example, hangovers, headaches, nausea, shakiness and possibly vomiting and memory loss. There is also the risk that a person could overdose on alcohol (sometimes called alcohol poisoning) which can cause death.
- ▶ Other problems can be caused by the way alcohol makes you behave. These include the risk of falls, assaults, car accidents, unplanned pregnancy, shame and embarrassment about your behaviour, loss of valuable items such as a damaged car or lost phone, and financial losses through reckless spending while intoxicated, or loss of income through time off work.
- ▶ **Long-term harms** can include becoming physically or psychologically dependent upon alcohol, and developing liver or brain damage.

### How big a problem is it really?

The National Drug Strategy Household Survey found that in 2007 just over 10 per cent of Australians aged 14 years and over drank at levels that increased their risk of alcohol-related harm in the long-term. At least 26.8 per cent drank at levels that increased their risk of alcohol-related harm in the short-term at least monthly.

More people in the 20–29 year age group drank at these risky levels than any other age group, with over 16 per cent of 20–29 year old females drinking at levels that increased their risk of alcohol-related harm in the long-term. Over 45 per cent of 20–29 year old males drank at levels that increased their risk of alcohol-related harm in the short-term at least monthly.

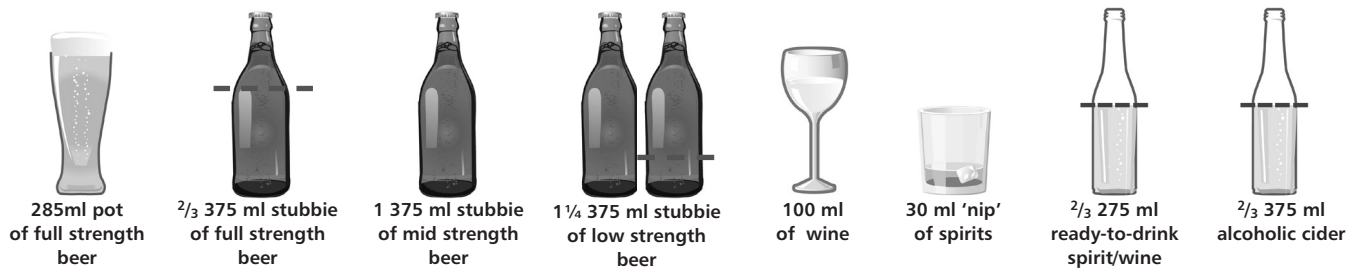
Most people under 18 years old (87.8 per cent) had never drunk alcohol; however, over 20 per cent of those who had drunk were drinking at least weekly.

Research shows that although the number of 12–17 year olds who are drinking alcohol has remained fairly stable during the past decade, the number of those who are drinking at harmful levels has increased significantly in that time. Among 16–24 year olds, alcohol-related harm is one of the leading causes of disease and injury.

### How can I reduce the risk of harm from alcohol?

While there is no safe level of drinking, the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) *Australian guidelines to reduce health risks from drinking alcohol*, recommend:

- ▶ For healthy men and women to reduce the risk of an alcohol-related injury or disease during their lifetime, they should drink no more than two standard drinks on any day.
- ▶ For healthy men and women to reduce the risk of an immediate alcohol-related injury, they should drink no more than four standard drinks on any one occasion.
- ▶ For children and young people under 18 years of age, not drinking is the safest option. Parents and carers are advised that children under the age of 15 are at greatest risk of harm from drinking and it is especially important that they do not drink alcohol. If young people aged 15–17 years choose to drink they should be in a safe environment, supervised by adults and stay within the low risk guidelines.
- ▶ For women who are pregnant, are planning a pregnancy, or are breastfeeding, not drinking is the safest option.



## What is a standard drink?

A standard drink is one that contains 10 grams of alcohol (12.5ml of pure alcohol). Different types of alcoholic drinks contain different amounts of alcohol.

Each of these drinks equals approximately one standard drink:

- A little less than 285ml pot of full strength beer (4.8% alc./vol)
- $\frac{2}{3}$  of a 375ml stubbie/can of full strength beer (4.8% alc./vol)
- A 375ml stubbie/can of mid strength beer (3.5% alc./vol)
- $1\frac{1}{4}$  of a 375ml stubbie/can of low strength beer (2.7% alc./vol)
- 100ml of wine or sparkling wine (12.0% alc./vol)
- A 30ml "shot" or "nip" of spirits (40.0% alc./vol)
- $\frac{2}{3}$  of a 275ml bottle/can of ready-to-drink spirits/wine (7.0% alc./vol)
- $\frac{2}{3}$  of a 375ml bottle/can of alcoholic cider (5.0% alc./vol).

Keep in mind that not all drinks contain the same concentration of alcohol, and most venues do not serve alcohol in standard drink sizes. Beware of bigger glasses, bottles or cans which hold more than one standard drink. If you are not sure, read the label.

## Some tips for controlling your drinking

Be aware of how alcohol affects you as an individual.

If you know you will be drinking alcohol, make sure you plan ahead.

### Staying safe

- If you are partying with a group of friends, agree that one of the group will not drink, and will be responsible for driving and looking out for the

group generally. Of course, each person is ultimately responsible for his or her own behaviour.

- Make sure you can call a member of your family or a friend if you need help.

## Reducing your drinking

- **Set limits for yourself, and stick to them.** Don't let other people pressure you into drinking more than you want.
- **Quench your thirst first.** Have a non-alcoholic drink first if you are thirsty.
- **Drink slowly.** Take sips, not gulps.
- **Drink from a small glass.** Some wine glasses can hold several standard drinks.
- **Be aware of exactly what you are drinking.** Remember that "alcopops" (sweet flavoured ready-to-drink or pre-mixed spirits/wine) can be quite strong, even though they don't taste like strong alcohol.
- **Try a low alcohol/non-alcoholic alternative.**
- **Eat before and while drinking, but avoid salty snacks, which will make you thirsty.**
- **Avoid getting into a "round" or a "shout".** They are sure to make you drink faster, and drink more, so that you can keep up with your friends.
- **Avoid "top ups".** Drink one drink at a time to keep track of how much you are drinking.
- **Stay busy.** Don't just sit and drink. Dancing, playing music or games can take the focus away from drinking.

## More information

- If you are worried about the amount you are drinking, and would like help to cut down, see your family doctor or contact the alcohol and other drug service in your state or territory [www.druginfo.adf.org.au/browse.asp?ContainerID=support](http://www.druginfo.adf.org.au/browse.asp?ContainerID=support).
- For more information on drugs and drug prevention contact the DrugInfo Clearinghouse on tel. 1300 85 85 84, email [druginfo@adf.org.au](mailto:druginfo@adf.org.au).

## More information

For more information on drugs and drug prevention contact the DrugInfo Clearinghouse on tel. 1300 8585 84, email [druginfo@adf.org.au](mailto:druginfo@adf.org.au), or see our website [www.druginfo.adf.org.au](http://www.druginfo.adf.org.au)