

Call an ambulance immediately if:

- They have been drinking and “pass out” or become unable to speak or move. If they are still breathing and have a pulse - lie them on their side while waiting for the ambulance
 - They have no pulse and are not breathing commence CPR (Cardio-Pulmonary Resuscitation) immediately and wait for the ambulance
 - They have a pulse but NO BREATHING - commence mouth-to-mouth resuscitation ONLY
- Unconscious people have a high risk of a vomiting and choking to death so it is important to turn them on their side in the safety position and make sure their airways are clear, and ensure that they are not left alone.

Overdose

Alcohol is central nervous system depressant, and drinking too much can cause the body and nervous system to shut down to the point of unconsciousness and in severe cases, coma with accompanying risk of brain damage or death.

Withdrawal

Withdrawal/detox from alcohol is extremely stressful physically and mentally, and carries higher physical risks than withdrawal from many other drugs eg: shakes, hallucinations or fitting.

Detox and treatment

Whether being done at home or at a detox centre, detox from alcohol should be closely supervised. Withdrawal takes up to a week, and psychological dependency continues for some time (or for ever) after physical detox.

There are medical and non-medical, private and public detox centres available for alcohol withdrawal. Phone ADIS for details of services providing alcohol detox and support programs see **FACT SHEET No.1 Contacts**. Your local area Health Service, or Community Health Centre can also advise on local facilities.

Different treatments and approaches will suit different people, and more than one option may have to be tried. Treatment and rehabilitation ranges from the 12-step abstinence based model to controlled drinking programs being offered at many outpatient counselling centres. Naltrexone has been used in the treatment of alcohol dependency most positively for the prevention of relapse.



Alcohol



Common Names

Alcohol is also known as **booze, goon, grog, turps, getting on the piss.**



History of the drug

Alcohol is the most commonly used drug in Australia, but is not always regarded as a ‘drug’. Drinking in moderation does not harm most people, however, regular excessive drinking of alcohol is associated with a variety of health, personal and social problems. In 1992 the National Health and Medical Research Council developed a first set of guidelines for the Australian public to minimise harms associated with alcohol use. These have now been revised. Further information about them can be obtained from www.alcoholguidelines.gov.au. A standard drink is any drink that contains 10 grams (or 12.5 millilitres) of alcohol. For low risk drinking the following recommendations are made for men and women.

Women should drink no more than:

- 2 standard drinks a day and no more than 14 standard drinks in a week
 - 4 standard drinks on any one occasion
- Have one or two alcohol-free days a week.

Men should drink no more than:

- 4 standard drinks a day and no more than 28 standard drinks in a week
 - 6 standard drinks on any one occasion
- Have one or two alcohol-free days a week.

Medical research is still investigating if safe drinking levels exist for pregnant women. Until results are more conclusive, pregnant women or women intending to become pregnant are recommended to consider not drinking at all. They are advised not to become intoxicated.

Pregnant women should drink no more than:

- 2 standard drinks spread over at least 2 hrs on any one day and no more than 7 standard drinks in a week

The first few weeks after conception are probably the most critical in relation to alcohol, but women may not be aware of the pregnancy at this stage. Alcohol use during pregnancy can harm the unborn baby. It has been linked with higher risk of miscarriage or stillbirth. The most serious outcome is foetal alcohol syndrome which affects the infant both physically and mentally.

Women who are breastfeeding are advised to also follow the same recommendations, as alcohol in the blood stream passes into breast milk.

Forms of the drug

Alcohol is available in various strengths as a liquid. This is usually recorded on the bottle as a percentage by volume. Common types are wine, beer, ports/sherries, spirits, but people can also drink methylated spirits. Most alcohol products will label the number of standard drinks in each container. A standard drink contains 10 grams of alcohol.

Standard Drinks for common drinks are as follows. For light beer this is equal to 1 schooner. For full strength beer this is equal to 1 middy. For wine this is equal to one small glass, which is 100 mls. For fortified wines such as port or sherry, a standard drink is one 60 ml glass. For spirits it is one nip, which is 30 mls. The blood alcohol concentration will generally remain below 0.05 if a man of average size drinks no more than 2 standard drinks in the first hour and 1 per hour thereafter and a woman of average size drinks no more than one standard drink per hour.

Drug effects

Alcohol is a depressant and slows down parts of the brain and the nervous system. Alcohol passes straight into the blood stream from the small intestine and stomach.

Higher doses of alcohol can produce hallucinations, irrational behaviour, vomiting and convulsions.

Physical effects include:

- Immediate feelings of relaxation and less inhibition
- Reduced concentration and effects on co-ordination and judgement
- Slurred speech and blurred vision

Alcohol can also trigger aggression. Anyone who regularly drinks a lot of alcohol will probably experience some physical, emotional or social problems.

Alcohol is broken down into other substances by the liver. A healthy liver takes about an hour to break down one standard drink. When sobering up it takes time for the liver to do its job. Black coffee, cold showers, exercise, or vomiting does not speed up the work of the liver. Vomiting will remove only the alcohol in the stomach that has not had time to be absorbed into the bloodstream. At most the last drink will be eliminated. Taking a shower or drinking black coffee may help someone to feel more awake, but it will not reduce the alcohol content in their blood.

Risks and harms

- Because of the effects of alcohol on judgment and performance, blood alcohol levels are stipulated for some occupations and for driving a motor vehicle. A blood alcohol concentration (BAC) of up to 0.05 is allowed under most State laws for fully licensed drivers. Alcohol is implicated or involved in the majority of road accidents and domestic violence
- Around 30% of deaths by drowning are alcohol related
- Alcohol is responsible for the majority of drug-related deaths in 15-34 year olds

Amongst Australian teenagers “binge drinking” (drinking to get drunk, e.g. more than 5 drinks in a row) is an increasing and worrying phenomenon. Risks associated with this include:

- Internal physical damage including brain damage, overdose/unconsciousness
- Higher risk of being involved in car accidents, fights or criminal behaviour
- An increased risk of sexual assault for females
- An increase in risk-taking behaviour such as:
 - Using other drugs
 - Having unsafe sex
 - Dangerous behaviour like climbing bridges and so on

Physical problems associated with alcohol consumption include:

- Liver damage
- Heart and blood disorders
- Stomach inflammation
- Brain damage
- Impotence and menstrual irregularity may also occur

Emotional problems and social problems experienced can include:

- Depression
- Relationship and family problems
- Poor work performance
- Financial difficulties and legal problems

Dependency

People who regularly drink can develop tolerance and will need to drink larger amounts of alcohol to get the same effects as before. Regular drinkers can also become dependent on alcohol. Alcohol-free days are therefore recommended to assist people to remain in control of their drinking and within the recommended guidelines.

Danger signs

Combining alcohol with any other drug is extremely dangerous. Loss of control and judgement can lead to intoxication and/or risky use of other drugs including unsafe injection practices or experimentation. Mixing alcohol with tranquillisers or sedatives can significantly increase the risk of overdose. A majority of fatal heroin overdoses have alcohol in their blood as well. Combining alcohol with over-the-counter or prescribed medications may decrease their effectiveness and will increase the side effects of both.