

Health effects of alcohol

Alcohol has been causally linked to more than 60 different medical conditions¹ including cirrhosis of the liver, inflammation of the gut and pancreas, heart and circulatory problems, sleep disorders, male impotency, eye diseases and conditions, and alcohol dependence.² Alcohol consumption also raises the overall risk of cancer, including cancer of the mouth, throat and oesophagus, breast cancer and bowel cancer.³

Consumption of alcohol affects concentration, coordination and judgement, and slows response time to unexpected situations.⁴ Alcohol alters brain receptors and can result in an increased likelihood of risk-taking with impaired problem-solving in conflict situations, increasing the risk of aggressive behaviour.⁵ Alcohol consumption also increases the risk of mental illness, such as depression, in people who are prone to these conditions.⁶ There is also a high co-morbidity between alcohol misuse and the misuse of other drugs, with consistent patterns in the uptake of polydrug use among those treated for alcohol problems.⁷

Alcohol consumed during pregnancy can cause complications and damage to the developing foetus, including fetal alcohol syndrome.⁸ The risks are greatest with high, frequent alcohol consumption during the first trimester of pregnancy.⁹ It has not been possible to establish a threshold below which adverse effects on the foetus do not occur.

Both the amount of alcohol consumed and patterns of drinking contribute to all these health risks. Regular drinking at high levels increases the risk of chronic ill health and premature death, while single or occasional episodes of heavy drinking ("binge drinking") can lead to an increased incidence of injury, motor vehicle accidents and violence.¹⁰

While some studies have found that, at low levels of consumption, alcohol may have some health benefits, nearly all of the potential benefits are confined to males over the age of 45 and women past menopause.



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2. National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) 2007, Australian alcohol guidelines for low-risk drinking: draft for public consultation, October, p.28-29, www.nhmrc.gov.au
3. Op. cit.
4. Op. cit.
5. Op. cit.
6. Op. cit.
7. Ministerial Council on Drug Strategy 2001, Alcohol in Australia: Issues and Strategies, Department of Health & Aged Care, Canberra, p.6.
8. National Health and Medical Research Council, 2007, Australian alcohol guidelines for low-risk drinking: draft for public consultation, October, www.nhmrc.gov.au
9. [1]National Preventative Health Taskforce (NPHT) 2008, Technical Report No. 3: Preventing Alcohol-related Harm in Australia: a window of opportunity, Commonwealth of Australia, p.12.
10. ABS 2006, Alcohol consumption in Australia: a snapshot, 2004-05, no.4832.0.55.001; Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) 2008, Indicators for chronic diseases and their determinants, 2008, Cat.no.PHE 75, Canberra: AIHW.

*Alcohol Use and Harms in Australia (2009) - Information paper. <http://ama.com.au/node/4762>