Positive Choices
Drug and Alcohol Information
Get informed, stay smart, stay safe

Australia's updated alcohol guidelines explained

Introduction

Alcohol is the most commonly used drug in Australia and has fast become a regular part of Australian society. However, a vast body of research shows that drinking alcohol can harm the individual and those around them. The '*Australian guidelines to reduce health risks from drinking alcohol*' by the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) are aimed at reducing health risks arising from alcohol consumption. The guidelines provide health professionals, policy makers, and the general Australian community with evidence-based recommendations on the health effects of drinking alcohol. They are intended to help individuals make informed decisions about alcohol consumption in their daily lives. A recently revised version of the guidelines was released in late 2020.

What are the Australian alcohol guidelines?

Below are the three current guidelines as laid out by the NHMRC, each guideline is aimed at a specific population group.

Guideline 1: Reducing the risk of alcohol-related harm for adults.
To reduce the risk of harm from alcohol-related disease or injury, healthy men and women should drink no more than 10 standard drinks a week and no more than 4 standard drinks on any one day.

The less you drink, the lower your risk of harm from alcohol

Guideline 2: Children and people under 18 years of age.
To reduce the risk of injury and other harms to health, children, and people under 18 years of age should not drink alcohol.

Guideline 3: Women who are pregnant or breastfeeding.
There are two recommendations within guideline 3; one specifically for pregnant women, and one for those who are breastfeeding.

1. To prevent harm from alcohol to their unborn child, women who are pregnant or planning a pregnancy should not drink alcohol.
2. For women who are breastfeeding, not drinking alcohol is safest for their baby.

What is a standard drink?

In Australia one 'standard drink' contains 10 grams of pure alcohol. Different drinks contain different amounts of alcohol. For example, one can of beer doesn't necessarily equal one standard drink. It will depend on the percentage (%) of alcohol in the drink, commonly known as the 'strength' of a drink. See the figure below for what one standard drink can look like.



What has changed from previous years?

Updates to the guidelines are based on findings from extensive research and expert input. One of the main differences between the 2009 and 2020 guidelines is the revised recommendations for adults. To reduce the lifetime risk of harm from alcohol-related disease or injury, the number of standard drinks has been reduced to no more than 10 standard drinks per week. Previously the recommendation was to drink no more than two standard drinks on any day (14 standard drinks per week). These updates were required to ensure a healthy adult minimises their risk of alcohol-related death, disease or injury. New evidence shows a stronger and more consistent relationship between drinking alcohol and risk of cancers including breast, liver, pancreatic, colorectal, oesophageal, mouth and throat cancer. The level of risk for cancer increases as more alcohol is consumed.

Recommendations for children aged <18 years have changed slightly. In the previous edition of the guidelines, advice was split for those under 15 years of age and those aged 15-17 years. In the current guidelines there is one single recommendation for all under 18s i.e., to reduce the risk of alcohol-related injury and other harms, they should not drink alcohol at all. There continues to be clear evidence that people under 18 are particularly vulnerable to alcohol-related harms, and the one guideline for all adolescents gives a clear message that is in line with the current evidence.

Finally, for pregnant women the 2020 guidelines have been revised from "not drinking is the safest option" to making a clear recommendation that when pregnant, you "should not drink". This update responds to new evidence which shows there is no safe level of alcohol during pregnancy. Recent findings also show that drinking **any** amount of alcohol during pregnancy is directly linked to developmental abnormalities (craniofacial), mental disorders, attention deficits, and impulsiveness in offspring.

It's important to remember that following the guidelines does not remove all risk. About 1 out of 100 Australians, drinking within these recommendations, is still likely to die from an alcohol-related condition.

For more information and the evidence documents which informed the guidelines check out the National Health and Medical Research Council websitehere.

Young people: Importance of delaying drinking alcohol for as long as possible

As outlined in Guideline 2 it is recommended that people under 18 should not drink alcohol.

The National Health and Medical Research Council has made a strong recommendation that people under the age of 18 should not drink alcohol at all. This is important because the brain undergoes significant development in adolescence, and in fact continues to develop up until the age of 25. Young people are therefore particularly vulnerable to the harmful effects of alcohol consumption, and should delay alcohol use for as long as possible. There are a number of risks associated with early initiation of alcohol including:

- Increased risk of heavy alcohol use in older adolescence.
- Greater likelihood of developing an alcohol use disorder later in life.
- Increased risk of other drug use.
- Increased risk of developing mental health related problems.
- Disruptions to brain growth and neurochemical functioning.
- Poorer school performance.
- Risky sexual activity.

For more resources on alcohol, including how alcohol affects the body and the developing brain, check out these resources on Positive Choices:

Factsheet: Alcohol

Factsheet: How parents can protect against alcohol use and related harms

Factsheet: The unintended normalisation of alcohol: What role does the family play

Factsheet: How teachers can guide students against drug and alcohol related harms

School based alcohol prevention program: OurFutures

Video: Parents & Teenagers talk about alcohol use

Game: Standard Drink Calculator

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