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

Drugs a-to-z

Alcohol: Factsheet

Evidence ratings:

This resource has undergone expert review. See our Help/Q&A section for more details.

Year: Year 7–8, Year 9–10, Year 11–12

Targeted Drugs: Alcohol

Tags: booze, grog

Time Allocated: Partial lesson (under 45mins)

Origin: Australian

Cost:
Free

What is alcohol?

Alcohol is a colourless liquid contained in wine, beer, spirits and other alcoholic drinks. Alcohol is a depressant because it slows down the way your brain relays information to the rest of the body. The legal age to buy alcohol in Australia is 18 years of age.

Types of alcohol include:

- Beer
- Wine, including sparkling (fizzy) wines
- Cider
- Spirits (e.g. vodka, gin, rum, bourbon, whisky)
- Liqueurs (e.g. coffee, hazelnut or melon flavoured alcohol)
- Pre-mixed drinks, also known as ready-to-drinks (e.g. cans of bourbon and cola, bottles of vodka or rum mixed with soft drink, vodka mixed with chocolate milk)
- Fortified wines (e.g. port, sherry)

How long do the effects of alcohol last?

The effects of alcohol vary greatly from person to person and depend on things like gender, age, size, mood, medical conditions, and whether it is taken together with other drugs.

Drinks also vary greatly in how much alcohol they contain. The more alcohol a drink contains, the longer it takes for the body to process. In Australia, one “standard drink” is a drink that contains 10 grams of pure alcohol. As you can see in the image below, different drinks contain different amounts of alcohol. To test your knowledge, you might like to complete our “Understanding standard drinks” worksheet.

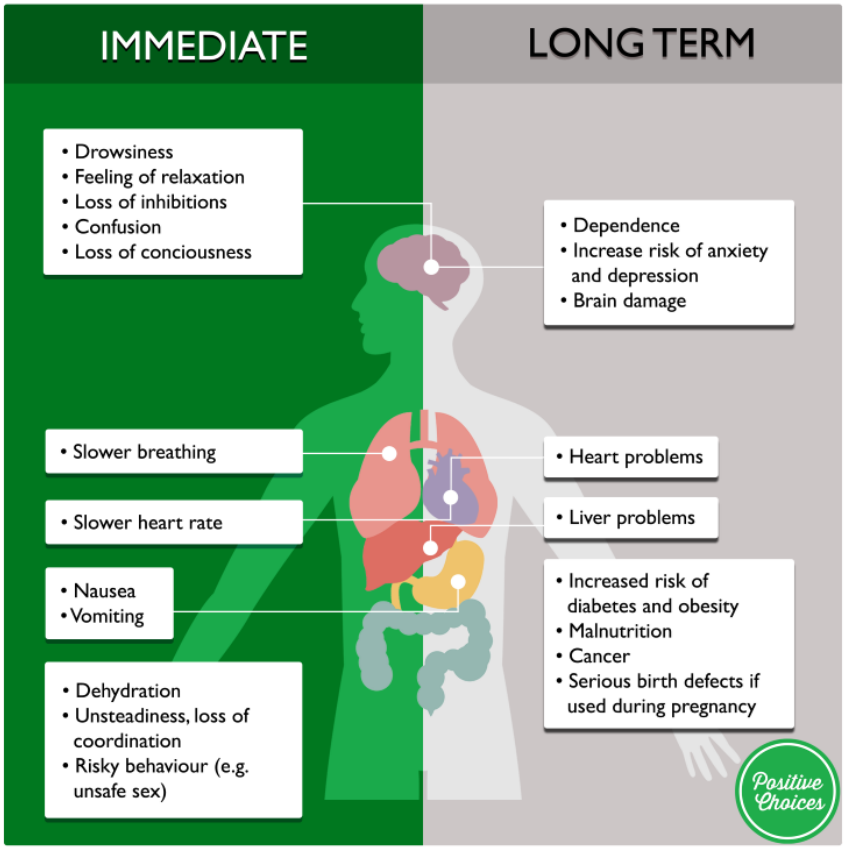
Figure 1: Number of standard drinks in alcoholic beverages.

What are the effects of alcohol?

Alcohol is the most commonly used recreational drug in Australia. After tobacco, it is the second leading cause of drug-related death and hospital admissions. Some harms are linked to drinking too much on one occasion (e.g. injuries, unsafe sex, alcohol poisoning) while other harms are linked to regular drinking (e.g. liver problems, addiction).

The effects of alcohol can be immediate or long-term, as listed in the table below.

Immediate	**Long-term**
Slower breathing and heart rate	Dependence (see glossary)
Drowsiness	Increased risk of anxiety and depression
Feeling of relaxation	Increased risk of diabetes and obesity
Loss of inhibitions	Brain damage
Dehydration	Malnutrition
Unsteadiness, loss of coordination	Heart problems
Risky behaviour (e.g., unsafe sex)	Liver problems
Confusion	Cancer
Nausea, vomiting	Serious birth defects if used during pregnancy
Loss of consciousness	



Young people and alcohol

The human brain is still developing and maturing well into the 20s. **Research findings show that drinking alcohol during the teenage years can disrupt healthy brain development.** For this reason, teenagers are advised to avoid drinking for as long as possible. Starting to drink at an earlier age also places young people at greater risk of developing alcohol-related problems later in life.

When alcohol is absorbed, it is distributed throughout the water held in a person's body. On average, young people have a smaller body mass than adults and so have less water. This means that in a younger person there is less water to dilute the alcohol, so the alcohol will have a greater effect. Younger people may lack experience of drinking and might not know how it will affect them. When young people do drink, it is often out with friends in a situation where they are at high-risk of accidents or injury.

Alcohol use among young Australians

The use of alcohol among young people aged 12-17 has been declining over recent years. In 2022-2023 only 22% of young people used alcohol in the past month. Additionally, more young people in Australia are choosing not to drink. The number of young people who never consumed alcohol has increased from one in four (26%) in 2011 to one in three (35%) in 2022-2023.

Rates of high-risk drinking among young people, however, remain high.

- While any alcohol consumption is risky for teenagers, high-risk drinking is defined as drinking an amount that increases the risk of accident or injury.Among young people who drink, one in two report drinking five or more alcoholic drinks in a single session in the past month (46%).
- Among young people who had drunk alcohol, one in four reported they did something they later regretted (24%) and most (54%) could think of at least one negative outcome related to their drinking, such as vomiting, using other drugs or getting into an argument.
- More than one in five (21%) or 4.5 million Australians were victims of an alcohol-related incident in 2019. This includes feeling fearful of someone who is under the influence of alcohol, as well as verbal, physical and sexual assault. Drinking alcohol increases the risk of being a victim of assault as it is harder to assess the risk involved in a situation after drinking.

It is important that young people understand the effects of alcohol and the potential negative consequences so that they can make informed decisions.

Source: Scully, M., Koh, I., Bain, E., Wakefield, M. & Durkin, S. (2023). ASSAD 2022-2023: Australian secondary school students' use of alcohol and other substances. Cancel Council Victoria.

Personal stories

"What worries me about alcohol is the thought of getting too drunk and that you could hurt a mate or do something you regret."
-Daniel*, 14

Alcohol and driving

Alcohol is a huge contributor to accidents, deaths and injuries on the roads each year. Driving requires concentration, good coordination and reflexes, and the ability to make accurate judgements and decisions. Alcohol reduces all of these abilities. The risk of serious injury and death from drink driving is greater in regional and rural areas, so people who live in those communities should be especially careful.

Research shows that injuries and deaths from drink driving are much greater among young people than adults. This is why the legal alcohol limit is zero for learner and provisional licence holders.

Evidence Base

This factsheet was developed following expert review by researchers at the Matilda Centre for Research in Mental Health and Substance Use at the University of Sydney, the National Drug & Alcohol Research Centre at the University of New South Wales, and the National Drug Research Institute at Curtin University.

- Credit to Dr Tina Lam, National Drug Research Institute, Curtin University, WA for the Standard Drinks Chart.

Sources

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