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Factsheet

Alcohol: a performance impairing drug

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Introduction

Alcohol is the most widely used mood-changing drug in Australia. Alcohol can be an enjoyable part of life and having a drink is often part of relaxing with friends, celebrating or commiserating. However, alcohol is also a significant cause of injury and ill health, violence, crime, family breakdown, road accidents, loss of productivity in workplaces and death in Australia.

The *2010 National Drug Household Survey* of Australians aged 14 years and over found that:

- One in five drank in a pattern that put them at risk of harm from alcohol-related disease or injury over their lifetime.
- Around two in five people drank at least once in the last 12 months at levels that placed them at risk of an alcohol-related injury from a single drinking occasion.

The National Health and Medical Research Council reports that:

- Between 1992 and 2001 more than 31,000 deaths were attributed to risky or high-risk alcohol consumption
- In 2007–08, 65,702 Australians undertook a phase of treatment associated with alcohol.

This fact sheet outlines some of the ways that alcohol can affect sporting performance and provides some strategies that can be used to minimise the risk of harms.

Immediate and short term impact of alcohol

Alcohol can affect a person's sporting performance and recovery afterwards.

Hangovers: If a person drank a lot at night they may still have a high concentration of alcohol in their bloodstream the following day. They may experience a range of symptoms such as headaches, fatigue, shakiness, nausea and vomiting.

Slower reflexes and reduced coordination: Drinking even a small amount of alcohol before, or during, a game can affect a person's reaction time, reflexes, balance, hand-eye coordination and motor skills. This can affect a person's speed and performance and increase the risk of injury.

Dehydration: After exercising, the body needs to be rehydrated. Alcohol can cause further dehydration by suppressing a hormone that affects the efficiency of the kidneys to reabsorb water.



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Factsheet

Reduced performance and stamina: To perform at its peak, the body undergoes a number of processes, including releasing glucose into the blood stream for energy and removing waste products generated by muscles. If a person has drunk alcohol, their body also needs to break down the alcohol. These two processes compete for resources and when combined with dehydration, decrease a person's performance and stamina.

Increased risk of inappropriate behaviour: Alcohol can cause people to become more relaxed and make them feel more confident. This can increase the likelihood that they may respond to a situation in an inappropriate way during a match. For example, they may become aggressive or violent towards other players/competitors, officials or spectators.

Soft tissue injuries take longer to repair: Treating a soft tissue injury involves reducing blood flow to the area, however alcohol increases blood flow to the area and as a result increases the recovery time.

Impact on general recovery: Drinking alcohol before, during or after a game can distract people and affect their ability to make decisions. This may result in people not carrying out the appropriate recovery strategies to help the body refuel, rehydrate and repair itself after exercise. People may also neglect to follow up injury management strategies and rehabilitation.

Longer term impact of alcohol

Over the longer term, alcohol can cause a number of health and social problems that can impact on a person and their sporting performance.

General health: Heavy consumption of alcohol over time can cause many health problems and damage many parts of the body. For example, it can affect the heart, lungs, liver, stomach, pancreas and brain and cause muscle weakness and loss of muscle tissue.

Weight management: Not only is alcohol high in kilojoules it is also associated with poor food choices. There is also evidence that eating high-fat foods while drinking alcohol, the fat in these foods is more likely to be stored in the body.

Social problems: Alcohol can affect relationships. There may be conflict among team mates if a person continuously misses training, turns up with a hangover, performs poorly or embarrasses the team/sport through bad behaviour.

Mental health issues: There is a relationship between alcohol and poor mental health. Some people may use alcohol in an attempt to cope with their mental health issues; however, there is evidence that for some people, alcohol can increase the risk of mental health conditions such as depression and anxiety.



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Factsheet

Minimising the risks To help people make informed decisions about their drinking and the risks to their health, the National Health and Medical Research Council of Australia (NHMRC) has developed a set of guidelines.

In general, the guidelines state that there is no safe level of drinking and the more a person drinks, the greater the risk of harms. More specifically, the guidelines provide the following recommendations:

- **For healthy men and women, drinking no more than two standard drinks on any day reduces the risk of an alcohol-related disease or injury during their lifetime.** If this guideline is followed, the lifetime risk of death from an alcohol-related injury or disease is less than 1 in 100. With every drink above that the guideline, the risk increases substantially.
- **For healthy men and women, drinking no more than four standard drinks on a single occasion reduces the risk of alcohol-related injury arising from that occasion.** When compared to not drinking, having four drinks on a single occasion more than doubles the risk of experiencing an injury in than six hours afterwards. With every drink above that, the risk of injury increases dramatically.
- **For children and young people under 18 years of age, not drinking alcohol is the safest option.** When compared to older drinkers, young people are more likely to engage in dangerous and antisocial behaviour when drinking. Young drinkers may also be at greater risk, as the brain continues to develop and undergoes many changes throughout adolescence. Drinking alcohol may affect brain development and can lead to alcohol-related harms later in life.
- **For women who are pregnant, planning a pregnancy or breastfeeding, not drinking is the safest option.** When a pregnant women drinks, the alcohol crosses the placenta to the unborn baby. This can affect the development of the baby and may also cause problems such as bleeding, miscarriage, stillbirth and premature birth. Alcohol can also reduce a mother's milk supply and also passes through the blood stream into breastmilk, affecting the baby's feeding and sleeping patterns, and development

Some helpful strategies to manage drinking

Whether having a quiet drink with team mates or celebrating a win, there are a range of practical strategies that can help people manage their drinking. Some examples are outlined below.

- **Look out for each other:** Let your team mates know if they've had enough to drink.
- **Plan ahead:** For example, how will you get home safely? Who will you call if you need help?
- **Set limits for yourself, and stick to them:** Be aware of how alcohol affects you as an individual and don't let other people pressure you into drinking more than you want. Keeping the bottle caps or labels can help you keep track of when you reach your limit.



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Factsheet

- **Start with a non-alcoholic drink:** You will drink much faster if you are thirsty, so have a non-alcoholic drink to quench your thirst before you start drinking alcohol.
- **Eat before and while you are drinking:** Eating slows your drinking pace and fills you up. If you have a full stomach, alcohol will be absorbed more slowly. But avoid salty snacks, which will make you thirsty.
- **Drink slowly:** Take sips, not gulps.
- **One drink at a time:** Don't let people top up your drinks. It is hard to keep track of how much alcohol you have drunk.
- **Pace yourself:** Try having a "spacer", a non-alcoholic drink every second or third drink.
- **Know what you are drinking:** Not all drinks contain the same concentration of alcohol. Some drinks, such as the sweet flavoured ready-to-drink or pre-mixed spirits/wine, can be quite strong, even though they don't taste like it. If you are not sure, read the label.
- **Try the low-alcohol alternative:** A wide range of light beers are available. Low-alcohol or non-alcoholic wines are also becoming more available. Most places that serve cocktails also serve non-alcoholic versions.
- **Avoid "shouts":** Don't get involved in shouts, or rounds. Drink at your own pace—not someone else's. If you do get stuck in a shout, buy a non-alcoholic drink for yourself when it's your turn.
- **Stay busy:** If you have something to do, it can take the focus away from drinking. Play pool, games, music or dance.

More information If you are worried about your drinking, and would like help, information, counselling, advice and referral to treatment contact:

- Your family doctor
 - Your local community health service
 - DirectLine on tel. 1800 888 236
 - Counselling online on web www.counsellingonline.org.au
 - Family Drug Help on tel. 1300 660 068
- For more information on drugs and drug prevention contact:
- DrugInfo Clearinghouse on tel. 1300 85 85 84, email druginfo@adf.org.au

References

1. 2007 National Drug Household Survey: first results, Canberra: Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2008
2. NHMRC 2011 Alcohol and Health in Australia available at <http://www.nhmrc.gov.au/your-health/alcohol-guidelines/alcohol-and-health-australia>, accessed 09/01/13