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Alcohol is the most widely used recreational drug in Australia, but drinking too much can be harmful

Reducing how much you drink can have many benefits, such as:

- improved mood and sleep
- saving money
- improved relationships with loved ones
- lowered risk of long-term health problems, such as cancer.¹

If you're concerned about your drinking, this guide could help you.

The information in this booklet is offered for general purposes. It's not a substitute for specific, professional advice.

For further information, counselling or other assistance, contact the National Alcohol and Drug Hotline on **1800 250 015**



Part 1: Background and information

Is my drinking harmful?

These questions can help you reflect on whether your drinking is having negative impacts.

- Do you find it hard to stop drinking once you have started?
- Are you often unable to remember what happened when you were drinking?
- Do you experience withdrawal symptoms when you have had a break from drinking?
- Are there times when you feel you need to have a drink to cope?
- Does your drinking affect your relationships, home life, work or school?
- Is a family member, friend or health care worker worried about your drinking?
- Have you experienced any negative health effects from drinking alcohol?²

If you answered yes to any of these questions, drinking less or not drinking at all can reduce alcohol-related harms.

To better understand how your drinking might be affecting you, complete the World Health Organization's risk assessment tool. Click through and scroll down to find the Drinking Calculator: adf.org.au/reducing-risk/alcohol/alcohol-guidelines

Australian alcohol guidelines

Australia has guidelines to reduce the health risks from drinking alcohol.

The guidelines recommend adults over 18 years old drink **no more** than:

- 10 standard drinks per week
- 4 standard drinks on any one day.³

Following these guidelines keeps the risk of harm from alcohol low, but it doesn't remove all risk. The less you drink, the lower your risk of harm from alcohol.

Situations where drinking increases the immediate risk of harm include:

- if you are planning a pregnancy, pregnant or breastfeeding
- activities that need a lot of focus, such as swimming, driving or watching children
- using certain medicines or drugs.

The safest option is not to drink in these situations.³

More information about the guidelines is available at adf.org.au/reducing-risk/alcohol/alcohol-guidelines

Standard drinks

Not all drinks contain the same amount of alcohol.

You can keep track of how much alcohol you are drinking by using 'standard drinks'.

A standard drink is one that contains 10 grams of pure alcohol.⁴

Some examples of a standard drink include:



285 ml (a "pot", "middy" or "handle") of full strength beer (4.8% alc./vol.)



375 ml (a stubby or can) of low strength beer (3.5% alc./vol.)



100 ml (a small glass) of wine (13.5% alc./vol.)



30 ml (a nip) of spirits (40% alc./vol.)

If you don't know how many standard drinks are in your drink, check on the label or ask the person serving you the drink.

More information about standard drinks is available at adf.org.au/insights/what-is-a-standard-drink

Overdose

If you drink a large amount of alcohol, you could overdose.

Call an ambulance straight away by dialling triple zero (000) if you or someone else has any of the following symptoms:

- slowed breathing
- confusion
- blurred vision
- nausea, vomiting
- passing out, coma.^{3,5}

Long-term effects

Heavy consumption of alcohol over time can damage many parts of the body.

Regular and heavy use of alcohol can cause:

- poor memory and brain damage
- difficulty getting an erection or having children
- liver disease
- cancer
- high blood pressure and heart disease
- needing to drink more to get the same effect (tolerance)
- physical dependence on alcohol.^{3,5}

For more info on alcohol and pregnancy, go to adf.org.au/insights/alcohol-and-pregnancy

Mental health effects

Research suggests that drinking alcohol may cause mental health problems or make these problems worse.^{3,6,7}

People with mental health issues may also drink more alcohol to self-medicate.

Although alcohol might feel like it relieves symptoms of anxiety or depression in the short term, it's more likely to cause anxiety and depression in the long term.^{3,6,7}

Withdrawals

If you are currently drinking a lot of alcohol or have been drinking for a long time, your body may be physically dependent on alcohol.

This can cause withdrawal symptoms when you stop or reduce your alcohol use.

Withdrawal symptoms can start within a few hours after your last drink and can last for two to seven days.

Symptoms include:

- sweating
- tremors
- nausea
- anxiety, irritability, difficulty sleeping
- seizure or fits
- poor appetite
- delusions and hallucinations.^{3,8}

Withdrawal can be serious and sometimes cause death

Speak with a health professional before stopping or reducing your drinking if you:

- have been consuming a lot of alcohol for a long time
- have experienced alcohol withdrawal symptoms in the past.⁸

Read more about withdrawal at adf.org.au/reducing-risk/withdrawal/

Part 2: Prepare for change

Advantages and disadvantages

It can be helpful to create a list of advantages and disadvantages for when you need help focussing on your goals or are struggling.

Some examples are already listed to help get you started.

Advantages of changing your drinking patterns

- No more hangovers.

Disadvantages of changing your drinking patterns

- Harder to socialise and meet new people.

Think about your list:

- Are there more advantages to changing your drinking patterns than disadvantages?
- How significant are the disadvantages?

Support people

It is important that you have people available to you that can help and support you. This could be your general practitioner (GP), a counsellor, friend, support group, or a combination of any of these.

Think about who you will reach out to for support. There is some space below to add your own support people.

Health professional

A health professional or GP can check your health, help with withdrawal symptoms, discuss treatment options, and provide referrals to other services.

Example: My doctor at ABC Doctors Office.

Counsellors

There are different types available depending on your needs and preferences. Options include individual or group and in person, telephone or video call.

Example: AOD Counselling Online
(www.counsellingonline.org.au)

Support groups

Often run by people who have been affected by alcohol dependence or harms and can understand what you are experiencing.

Example: Smart Recovery Australia Meetings
(smartrecoveryaustralia.com.au)

Friends and family

They should be someone you trust and feel comfortable talking to. If a friend or family member is supporting you, give them the Guidelines for support people page in the back of this booklet.

Phone apps

Applications on your phone can support you to reduce or stop alcohol use. One app available is DayBreak (hellosundaymorning.org/daybreak) which is free for all Australians to use.

For further information, counselling or other assistance, contact the National Alcohol and Drug Hotline on **1800 250 015**

Why do I drink?

Keeping a diary can help you understand how and why you drink and identify any patterns or risky situations.

For example:

- Did you drink more when you were in particular places, doing certain things or just being with certain people?
 - For example, at the sports club, watching TV with friends, at a party or at lunch on pay day?
- How were you feeling? Were you angry, happy, bored or feeling depressed?
 - Certain moods in different people can increase their urge to drink.
- Did your drinking result in conflict with your family, friends or strangers?
 - What led up to that situation?

Think about how you can change your routine or handle these situations differently.

Why do you drink?	How can you change your routine or handle these situations differently? <i>(see coping with the urge to drink/relapse on pg. 10 for ideas)</i>
<i>Because I am stressed out at work</i>	<i>Find other ways to de-stress after work, like going for a walk and listening to music</i>

Your support people may have some good ideas.

What are my goals?

It's important to decide how you want to change your drinking patterns.

Do you want to cut back, gradually reduce the amount until you quit, or quit drinking immediately?

Some things to consider when making this choice include:

- How much do you drink?
- Have you tried to cut down or quit before?
- Have you experienced severe withdrawal symptoms previously?

Think about what you could do in the short-term (over the next week) that will get you closer to your long-term goals.

It's important to set realistic goals. If you set goals that are too high and don't reach them, you may feel disappointed.

- Write down your goals and the dates by which you wish to achieve them. An example has been provided below.

There is space for this in the diary at the beginning of each week.

You should review your goals regularly.

- If you reach your goals, you can set new ones.
- If you don't reach them, have a look at what went wrong and try again.

You might find it helpful to discuss your goals with a support person or health professional.

Long term goal:

Reduce my drinking in line with the Australian alcohol guidelines

Short term goals:

Did not drink while watching TV

Maximum 4 drinks in one day

Maximum 10 drinks in one week

Long term goal:

Short term goals:

Part 3: Make the change

Now that you have set goals and identified strategies to help achieve these goals, you're well-equipped to make the change.

This diary will help you keep a record of what, when and why you are drinking. You can compare your progress with previous weeks and keep track of your goals.

Make sure you:

- Fill in days when you have had nothing to drink.
- Note the times when the urge to drink was strong but you didn't drink.
- Note how you coped with difficult situations.

If you're reducing your drinking, make sure you also:

- Enter all the alcoholic drinks you have.
- Work out how many standard drinks you've had each day.
- Add up the money you have spent on alcohol, including 'rounds' with friends.

Once you have started to change your drinking habits, continue to keep your diary.

Review your diary once a week, perhaps with your support person.

Think about what happened when the urge to drink was strong.

- How did you cope?
- What were you feeling when you drank more than you planned?
- How could you deal with that situation differently next time?


Once you have settled into a drinking pattern you are happy with, keep the diary for a week every few months to check if your drinking has changed.

Sample diary entries

Day	What time, where and with whom	Feelings before urge to drink/drinking	Feelings and what happened after/ instead of drinking	Amount and types of drinks	Money spent	Standard drinks
Mon	8pm In club, after training, with John & Anne	Felt relaxed, didn't feel like drinking	Went to club	4 pots of beer	\$22.00	5
Tue	6pm At home alone	Bad day at work, felt stressed & needed to unwind	Feeling down, went to pub	3 glasses of wine	\$21.00	4.5
Wed	7pm At home with family	Tired & stressed about work	Went for a walk to distract myself	0	0	0
Thur			Watched TV	0	0	0
Fri	5.30pm At the pub with workmates	Relaxed	Drank soft drink instead of beer	0	0	0
Sat		Felt relaxed, didn't feel like drinking	Watched TV	0	0	0
Sun	2pm BBQ at Jen and Pete's	Relaxed	Argued with John, felt guilty about drinking	1 bottle of wine	\$15.00	7.5

Goals: Week ending:

Day	What time, where and with whom	Feelings before urge to drink/drinking	Feelings and what happened after/instead of drinking	Amount and types of drinks	Money spent	Standard drinks
Mon						
Tue						
Wed						
Thur						
Fri						
Sat						
Sun						
Weekly Total						

 Download additional pages for the diary

Useful tips and tricks

Hints on cutting down

There are many strategies you can use to reduce your alcohol use. These include:

- Sip your drinks slowly. If you are thirsty have a soft drink or water first.
- Try to avoid drinking in rounds as people generally drink to keep up with the fastest drinker.
 - If you are in a round, drink a lower alcohol drink or skip a drink occasionally.
- Do things that distract you from drinking. Play pool, dance or talk to friends.
- Drink low and non-alcoholic drinks.
- Try having a 'spacer', a non-alcoholic drink every second or third drink.
- When mixing your own drinks, use more mixer and less alcohol than usual.
- Don't let people top up your drink. Always finish your drink before getting another one.
- Try to use standard drinks measures wherever possible, especially when drinking at home.

Tips on saying no - How will you respond when someone offers you a drink?

By thinking about how you'll respond before you are in that situation you can be prepared.

Your responses might include:

- No thanks, I'm cutting down.
- No thanks, I've given up.
- No thanks, I've had enough.
- No thanks, I'll sit this one out.
- No thanks, I have to get up early in the morning.
- Thanks, what non-alcoholic drinks are on offer?

If people won't accept no for an answer, you may have to avoid being around them.

It gets easier with practice. Choose a couple of these responses, or make up your own, and rehearse saying them by yourself so you sound confident and at ease.

Coping with the urge to drink and relapse

There may be times when you find it hard to stick to your goals or you just feel like giving up.

The first thing to do is to think about why you started all this in the first place.

- Take out the list of advantages and disadvantages and read it again.
- Talk to your support person, if they're available.
- Go for a walk or do another activity to take your mind off the urge.
- Delay having a drink for 15 minutes, the urge may pass.
- If you are in a 'risky' situation/environment, leave it.
- Try using relaxation techniques.

If you don't stick to your goals—don't be hard on yourself. Remember you have made some great changes, and there is support out there to help you through it.

Think about why it happened and how you can avoid that situation or cope differently next time. Ask your support person or health professional for help and advice.

Guidelines for supporters

Being asked to be someone's support person is a compliment, as they see you as someone they can trust and whose advice they respect.

There are a number of ways you can help your friend change their alcohol use.

- Read this booklet and then go through it with your friend.
- Discuss the areas where you can help.
- Be clear about when and where they can contact you if they are having trouble sticking to their goals. For example, can they ring you at work?
- You might want to arrange a regular time to get together to go over their progress and discuss how they are doing.
- Have rules about how involved you will be. Remember you are only there to help – changing alcohol use is their responsibility.
- Be constructive about their progress, congratulate them when things go well and avoid criticising when things go badly. Work with them to think of new ways to get through the difficult times.
- If they lapse or relapse, let them know it's a normal part of the process and not a failure. Look on it as a temporary setback and encourage them to keep going.
- Celebrate with them when they achieve their goals, this can be something simple like going for a meal or to the cinema.
- There are support groups, telephone help lines and services that support friends and family members. Contact details for some services are listed below:

Family Drug Help: 1300 660 068

Family Drug Support: 1300 368 186

Parent and Family Drug Support Line: 1800 653 203

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