

Facts About Alcohol

What is alcohol?

Alcohol is a drug which acts as a depressant (it slows down messages travelling between the brain and the body). The ingredient in alcohol that causes this effect is ethanol. Ethanol is produced as a result of the fermentation of grains (beer), vegetables (vodka), and fruits (wine). How does it work? Alcohol only takes a few minutes to reach the brain after being swallowed. It passes into the blood stream through the walls of the stomach and small intestine, and then quickly travels to all parts of the body, including the brain. If there is food in the stomach, this will slow down the speed that the alcohol is absorbed, but does not prevent drunkenness.

Sobering up takes time. The liver is the main organ of the body for removing alcohol from the bloodstream. The liver takes about an hour to break down the alcohol in a standard drink. Cold showers, exercise, black coffee, fresh air or vomiting will not sober someone up.

What are the short term harms of drinking alcohol?

Some of the short term harms of drinking alcohol include:

- falls and injuries
- nausea (feeling like vomiting)
- fight
- unsafe sex.
- headache

What are the long term harms of drinking alcohol?

Regular and ongoing drinking can cause harms to family and community, to mental health and to nearly every part of the body.

Long term health problems include:

- an increased risk of developing diabetes, cancer and high blood pressure
- sleep problems
- depression and/or stress

money problems

brain damage

low energy

infections

cirrhosis (liver damage)

unwanted pregnancy.

damaged kidneys

Is it safe to drink alcohol during pregnancy?

Alcohol may harm your baby while you are pregnant. Heavy drinking every day or heavy episodes of drinking are the most risky. However lower levels of drinking can harm the unborn baby. The Australian alcohol guidelines advise that the safest choice is not to drink alcohol when pregnant, planning a pregnancy or breastfeeding.

If you find it difficult to decrease or stop drinking alcohol speak to your health care practitioner for support and advice. If a woman drinks while she is pregnant she risks having a baby with Fetal alcohol spectrum disorder (FASD). FASD is a term used to describe a range of mental and physical problems that a baby is born with as a result of being exposed to alcohol during pregnancy. For more information on FASD see the Knowledge Centre FASD web resource.

What to do about an overdose

Call triple zero (000) for an ambulance if someone looks like they have had too much alcohol and are in trouble. Passing out is a sign that someone may have overdosed and this can sometimes lead to death. Ambulance officers don't have to involve the police.

While you wait for help to arrive:

stay with the person and keep
crowds back

if they lie down, put them on their
side in case they vomit.

make sure the person has enough
air and loosen any tight clothing

Withdrawal

If a person wants to give up alcohol but they have been drinking regularly for a long time, their body has to get used to being without alcohol. The person may experience withdrawal symptoms after stopping drinking. These symptoms usually start within a day after the last drink and can last less than a week. Symptoms can vary from mild to severe.

The most common symptoms include:

sleep problems

sweating

feeling anxious or restless

craving (a strong desire to drink).

tremors

The more severe the withdrawal the longer it lasts

Alcohol withdrawal symptoms:

Mild poor sleep for a few nights, feeling a bit stressed by day, feeling anxious or mildly restless. Typically lasts 1–3 days.

Moderate tremors, anxiety, sweating, diarrhoea and vomiting, fast heart rate, raised blood pressure and temperature. Stops within a week.

Severe may include hallucinations (seeing things that aren't there) and confusion, as well as the other milder symptoms of withdrawal. This type of confusion is called 'delirium tremens' (DTs) and needs urgent medical treatment. People with DTs can die if not treated quickly. DTs can last up to 10 days.

Seizure (fit) a seizure can be life threatening. It may also be a warning sign of a more serious withdrawal that is still developing. It is most common on the first day after drinking stops.

It is important to seek medical help to get through severe withdrawal symptoms safely. If a person has had severe withdrawals in the past, and lives in a remote community with no medical help, it is better if they plan to go through withdrawal where medical help is available.

Helping a person stay dry

Once a person has safely stopped drinking (they are 'dry'), and any withdrawal is over, they can be offered some form of support to help them stay dry. This may include group support such as AA or SMART recovery and medicines. Sometimes people may prefer to go to rehab. The care and support a person is provided is very important in helping them to stop drinking.

If a person starts drinking again, they can still be encouraged to start thinking about change. Once the drinker has become dry again, they can look back and learn from their slip-up.