

drinking patterns and levels of risk

Over three quarters of Australians now report that they drink alcohol. Most of these people drink at low risk levels most of the time. However, a high proportion of people also drink, occasionally, at levels that may place them at high risk; and people aged below 25 years have the riskiest drinking patterns. Between one quarter and one third of 14-25 year olds drink in a high risk manner.

ALCOHOL CONSUMPTION AND LEVELS OF RISK

In 2000, Australia was ranked 19 th in the world in terms of per capita alcohol consumption, consuming 7.8 litres of absolute alcohol per person per year. On a per person basis, Australians consumed 95.0 litres of beer (9th in the world), 19.7 litres of wine (18th in the world), and 1.3 litres of spirits (34 th in the world).

Underlying these figures are enormous variations in levels and patterns of drinking, from not drinking at all, to drinking at levels ranging from low to high risk, as set out in the tables below;

- Low risk levels define a level of drinking at which there is only a minimal risk of harm. At this level, there may be health benefits for some of the population.
- Risky levels are those at which risk of harm is significantly increased beyond any possible benefits.

- High risk drinking levels are those at which there is substantial risk of serious harm, and above which risk continues to increase rapidly.

As well as levels of risky drinking regarding short and long-term harm, there is now increased recognition of the critical importance of patterns of drinking in relation to intoxication and the short-term risk it carries. This includes occasional bouts of heavy drinking or what is sometimes referred to as binge drinking. While definitions of binge drinking vary, it includes deliberately drinking to intoxication, and this has been found to be most common among 14-25 year olds. For example, over 70% of male and 60% of female school leavers report 'getting drunk' on most or all days or nights of their 'schoolies week'.



THE PATTERNS AND LEVELS OF DRINKING BY 14-25 YEAR OLDS ARE OF MAJOR CONCERN

LEVELS OF RISK OF SHORT - AND LONG-TERM HARM: AS MEASURED BY NUMBER OF STANDARD DRINKS

For risk of acute harm (in the short-term) For risk of chronic harm (in the long-term)

MALES	Low Risk	Risky	High Risk	MALES	Low Risk	Risky	High Risk
on any one day	Up to 6 on any one day	7 to 10 on any one day	11 or more on any one day	On any average day	Up to 4 per day	5 to 6 per day	7 or more per day
	No more than 3 days per week			Overall weekly level	Up to 28 per week	29 to 42 per week	43 or more per week
FEMALES	Low Risk	Risky	High Risk	FEMALES	Low Risk	Risky	High Risk
on any one day	Up to 4 on any one day	5 to 6 on any one day	7 or more on any one day	On any average day	Up to 4 per day	5 to 6 per day	7 or more per day
	No more than 3 days per week			Overall weekly level	Up to 28 per week	29 to 42 per week	43 or more per week

ALCOHOL CONSUMPTION IN AUSTRALIA, AND SOME DIFFERENCES BY GENDER AND/OR AGE

Australia is a society where it is common to consume alcohol regularly at light to moderate levels, and sporadically at heavy levels in binge drinking patterns. On the basis of recent surveys it was estimated, conservatively, that:

- Almost half of all recent drinkers usually drank 1-2 standard drinks on any one occasion.
- Males (11.1%) were more likely than females (5.6%) to drink alcohol every day.
- Over half the alcohol consumed in 1998 was drunk at levels that posed short-term health risks to the drinker, while 39% was drunk at levels that posed long-term health risks.
- 31% of males and 24% of females drank at least once a month at levels that placed them at risk of short-term harm (such as injury) from drinking.
- 10% of males and 9% of females were at risk of long-term health problems due to alcohol.
- Young adults in the 18-25 age group were most likely to be current drinkers (up to 90%): that is, they had had at least one drink in the last 12 months; and among this age group 46% of males and 44% of females drank at least once a month at levels that placed them at risk of short-term harm.
- There were fewer current drinkers in the 14 to 17 year age group (approximately 65%), but the numbers in this age group drinking at levels that placed them at short-term harm were of considerable concern, since 21% of males and 24% of females drank at least once a month at levels that placed them at risk of short-term harm.
- In general, the likelihood of drinking at high risk levels decreased with age, with older age groups having smaller proportions of risky drinkers, compared with younger age groups.

Peer group pressure is considered by some investigators to be the most powerful risk factor for alcohol use by adolescents. Early exposure to peers who use alcohol results in early adolescent and increased problem alcohol use, and continued peer influence helps to maintain subsequent alcohol use, and weakens parental influence regarding drinking.

PRINCIPAL SOURCE

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