

Understanding alcohol.

1800 700 514 (Freecall)
unitingvictas.org.au/aod

What is alcohol?

Alcohol is a central nervous system depressant, which means it slows down information between your brain and body. It is the most commonly used drug in Australia. Most people who use alcohol drink a moderate amount and enjoy the effect, but others find their alcohol use can have unpleasant consequences that lead to problems for them, their friends, and families.

Common effects include:

- Feeling relaxed
- Reduced anxiety
- Relief from pain
- Euphoria
- Increased sociability
- Fewer inhibitions

Negative effects include:

- Dehydration
- Hangovers
- Confusion
- Impotence in men
- Nausea and vomiting (alcohol poisoning)
- Memory loss and loss of consciousness
- Poor decision-making
- High risk of assault
- Aggression and violence
- High impulsivity and risk-taking

Long-term negative effects include:

- Depression
- Anxiety
- Poor quality sleep
- Employment issues
- Damaged relationships with family and friends
- Legal consequences (fights, drink driving)
- Reduced stress tolerance
- Ongoing memory and concentration issues
- Increased cancer risk
- Liver and kidney damage

Cutting down or quitting

If you notice the negative effects of using alcohol are impacting your life, it might be time to cut back.

Tips for cutting down:

- Eat before you start drinking as food in the stomach helps absorb alcohol and stops you getting drunk too quickly
- Set limits for yourself such as number of standard drinks, or limit to how much money you'll spend
- Drink water between alcoholic drinks and have some water before bed to minimise the hangover
- Keep a drink diary which might include notes on amounts you drank, days you drank, or how you felt when drinking.

Reducing risks with drinking:

- Avoid mixing alcohol with other substances, including drugs, prescription medication, and other types of alcohol as these may worsen effects
- Stay around people you trust when you're drinking, and never leave your drink unattended
- Plan how you will get home before you start drinking (never drink and drive – hand your keys to a trustworthy friend if you need to).

The Australian Drinking Guidelines (2020)

- No "safe" use, but can minimise risk of harms
- Max. 4 standard drinks per day
- Max. 10 standard drinks per week
- Those who are pregnant, breastfeeding, or under 18 years should not use alcohol.

The future is bright.



Withdrawal

If you've decided to take a break from drinking or stop completely, good on you. The physical symptoms of alcohol withdrawal won't last forever. For most people, the worst is over within a week. Everyone experiences this differently, though there are common symptoms.

Week 1	Agitation, anxiety, confusion, diarrhoea, dizziness, headaches, nausea, poor sleep and vivid dreams, sweating or tremors.
Week 2	Decrease in withdrawal symptoms, and improved digestion, hydration, mental clarity and sleep.
Weeks 3-4	Improved immune system, liver health, physical functioning, skin health, sleep and stress tolerance.

Mentally it might take longer to adjust to not having alcohol around. You might experience triggers as physical cravings or as thoughts urging you to drink. These are common and will fade over time. Seek support from family, friends and a health practitioner.

Understanding the risks of withdrawal

Withdrawal seizures are uncommon but dangerous. They are most likely to occur in the first 1-2 days after stopping drinking. If you're drinking daily or in high amounts, it's important you do not suddenly stop without seeking medical advice. You may need medication and people to monitor your symptoms to safely withdraw.

Another risk is replacing alcohol with other substances or unhelpful behaviours to cope. Be careful to only take withdrawal medication as prescribed and watch for other behaviours such as increased smoking or binge eating.

Contacts

If you want to talk to someone about your own or someone else's alcohol or other drug use, you can get more information from these Victorian and Tasmanian state-wide services. If you are located in another state, these contacts will direct you to your local support services:

DirectLine

24/7 service offering counselling, information and referrals.

T 1800 888 236

directline.org.au

Harm Reduction Victoria

Support and information from other drug using peers.

T 03 9329 1500

hrvic.org.au

QUIT

T 13 78 48

quit.org.au

Family Drug and Gambling Help

Victorian support for family members.

T 1300 660 068

sharc.org.au/sharc-programs/family-drug-gambling-help

Drug alerts

health.vic.gov.au/alcohol-and-drugs/drug-alerts

Alcohol Tobacco and Other Drugs Tasmania Service Directory

atdc.org.au/service-directory

Alcohol and Drug Information Service TAS

24/7 service offering counselling, information and referrals.

T 1800 811 994

Uniting would like to thank consumer partners for drawing on their lived experience to contribute to this series of publications.

