

# ALCOHOL DEPENDENCE

Regular use of alcohol can result in alcohol dependence. When a person is alcohol dependent they feel a strong desire to drink and drinking is given priority over important commitments. Dependence ranges from mild to severe. People with severe dependence drink regularly at high-risk levels and often find it hard to limit how much they drink. Alcohol is strongly linked with anxiety and depression in those with alcohol dependence (alcohol dependence is associated with twice the risk of having major depression and a four-fold increased risk of experiencing both anxiety and depression) - this increases the risk of self-harm. Alcohol dependence is a major risk factor for suicide.

## KEY FEATURES OF ALCOHOL DEPENDENCE

- **A slight degree of dependence is not uncommon in the Australian population:** for example, finding it a little difficult to go a day without consuming some alcohol or finding it difficult to stop before consuming several drinks (even when there seem to be good reasons to drink less or not at all on a particular day). In the early stages of psychological dependence developing alcohol-related problems may not be evident, but there is a risk that regular habitual drinking will increase over time to become problematic.
- **While the risk of dependence is not easy to calculate,** it is higher for people drinking more frequently and at higher levels, but very small for people drinking within the guideline limits. One of the earliest and most common signs of dependence is a difficulty with limiting drinking to a low-risk amount on any single occasion—a few drinks can often lead to many more.

**More severe dependence** is associated with:

- Physical symptoms including increased **tolerance to the effects of alcohol** (that is, needing more alcohol to get the same degree of effect; for example, now needing four drinks to feel relaxed rather than one or two drinks as previously) and **withdrawal symptoms**, such as tremors, sweating, anxiety and vomiting when suddenly ceasing drinking (severe withdrawal can be life-threatening and needs to be medically supervised);
- Psychological symptoms (including: a sense of compulsion to drink (craving) or not being fully in control of one's drinking; depression and/or anxiety; several weeks of abstinence from alcohol often results in a marked reduction in depression and anxiety);
- Wanting to cut-down or stop drinking but not managing to do so.
- Social, relationship and vocational problems because drinking is interfering with obligations, tasks and goals (important activities may be given up).

## MENTAL HEALTH CONDITIONS

- People who regularly use alcohol to cope with their mental health conditions have an increased risk of becoming dependent on alcohol. Studies have shown that when people with significant alcohol dependence stop drinking entirely, after two to three weeks many will experience an improvement in their mood.
- Anyone at risk of, or under treatment for, a mental health condition should discuss their alcohol intake with a health professional. Recommendations about drinking will vary depending on the presenting mental health condition and medication regimes. In many instances, temporary or permanent abstinence may be necessary.
- Carers can encourage people with a mental health condition to stay within guideline levels, or to abstain if necessary.

## FAMILY HISTORY OF ALCOHOL PROBLEMS

- People with a family history of alcohol-related problems, including alcohol dependence, are more at risk than the general population of developing alcohol-related problems and becoming severely dependent on alcohol.
- Anyone with first (biological parents, full siblings and off-spring) or second-degree (biological aunts, uncles, grandparents, grandchildren and half-siblings) relatives with alcohol dependence should consider reducing their drinking to **below** Guideline 1 and 2 levels (i.e. less than 2 standard drinks a day on average) and also discuss their alcohol intake with a health professional.

## SUPPORTS

A number of professional, medical and voluntary agencies can help people who have problems with their drinking. Most states and territories have an alcohol and drug telephone helpline, which can provide information on specialist services available.

It is crucial that the impact of such problems on families and partners be recognised, and their needs supported. At the same time, families offer a key resource in helping people with a drinking-related problem, and are often the first to acknowledge such problems.

## RECOMMENDED CONSUMPTION LEVELS FOR LOW-RISK

### DRINKING GUIDELINE 1

For healthy men and women, **drinking no more than two standard drinks on any day** reduces the **lifetime risk of harm** from alcohol-related disease or injury.

### DRINKING GUIDELINE 2

Drinking **no more than four standard drinks on a single occasion** reduces the risk of alcohol-related **injury** arising from that occasion.

For children and young people under 18 years of age, not drinking alcohol is the safest option.

For women who are pregnant, planning a pregnancy, or breastfeeding, not drinking is the safest option.

Further reductions in the lifetime risk of alcohol-related disease or injury can be achieved by reducing the number of occasions of drinking across a lifetime, for example through regular alcohol-free days. Alcohol-free days also help to avoid the development of alcohol dependence.

You can find more information on the recommended levels of alcohol consumption in the Guidelines for Alcohol Consumption Fact Sheet.

**Adapted from** Australian Department of Health and Ageing, Australian Alcohol Guidelines Fact Sheets [www.alcoholguidelines.gov.au](http://www.alcoholguidelines.gov.au)

**Guidelines source:** National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) (2009). *Australian Guidelines to Reduce Health Risks from Drinking Alcohol*, Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra.

**Other sources:** Allsop, S. (Ed) (2008). *Drug Use and Mental Health*. Melbourne, IP Communications.

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**Severe alcohol dependence is associated with a range of health and social problems.**

## YOUR HEALTH AND ALCOHOL