

# ALCOHOL AND MENTAL HEALTH

## ALCOHOL CAN INTERACT WITH MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEMS IN VARIOUS WAYS:

- People with mental health problems are at increased risk of experiencing problems relating to alcohol (people with both anxiety and depressive disorders have four times the rate of alcohol dependence).
- There is growing evidence that alcohol increases the risk of highly prevalent mental health conditions such as depression (major depression is twice the usual rate in people who have an alcohol use disorder) and anxiety in some people.
- People diagnosed as having an alcohol dependence problem are also more likely to suffer from other mental health problems.
- There is a high correlation between alcohol dependence and Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). A large majority of veterans with a DVA accepted disability of alcohol dependence have a coexisting mental health condition, most commonly PTSD.
- Alcohol use at well above low-risk levels is itself a causal factor in a number of mental health conditions.

## WAYS IN WHICH ALCOHOL CAN MAKE MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEMS WORSE

There is clear evidence that drinking above the levels set in the Guidelines can lead to poorer outcomes for people who have a mental health problem:

- In particular, people who are depressed and sometimes drink excessively are at much greater risk of self-harm and suicide, especially if they also drink regularly above guideline levels.
- Depression can be made worse by drinking excessively and can also be a consequence of dependent drinking patterns. In many cases, mood will lift considerably after a few weeks of abstinence from alcohol.
- Alcohol can provide temporary relief for people experiencing significant anxiety. However, while alcohol consumption may bring some relief from anxiety or stress in the short-term, it can worsen anxiety in the longer term, especially with binge drinking over two days or more, and when the drinker becomes alcohol dependent.
- Individuals with social phobias are much more comfortable in social situations if they have used alcohol; a small amount of alcohol may induce short-term stress relief, but as tolerance develops more alcohol is required for the same effect and there is a risk of developing alcohol dependency.

- Many veterans report drinking above low-risk levels to cope with the symptoms of PTSD; drinking above low-risk levels will compromise the treatment of PTSD.
- Alcohol use above low-risk levels is associated with poorer outcomes for people suffering from schizophrenia; even low risk drinking can worsen the symptoms of this condition.
- Alcohol use is also high in patients with bipolar disorder; patients who suffer from bipolar disorder and alcohol dependence have significantly reduced quality of life compared with patients with bipolar disorder only.
- Alcohol can cause disrupted sleep. Even one or two drinks may result in reduced sleep quality and early morning waking, and disruption of sleep can be a trigger for a variety of mental health problems.
- Alcohol can interact in harmful ways with most of the medications prescribed for mental health problems, even at low-risk levels of drinking (1–2 standard drinks). Alcohol may interfere with the effectiveness of antidepressant medication.

## IN SUMMARY, ALCOHOL CAN:

- Lead to poorer mental health outcomes;
- Make the symptoms worse;
- Increase the risk of alcohol dependence in those with mental health issues;
- Interact in a harmful way with the medications prescribed for that problem, and/or with other drugs;
- Contribute to worse moods in the longer term; and
- Result in disrupted sleep that may trigger some mental health problems.

Anyone with a mental health problem should therefore discuss their alcohol intake with their doctor. People with a mental health problem need to be extremely careful with alcohol. If they do drink:

- They should take particular care to stay within the low-risk guidelines;
- They should consult with their doctor or pharmacist about possible side-effects; and
- They may need to consider not drinking at all, if they find it difficult to keep their drinking within these guideline levels; and to stop drinking entirely if symptoms persist.

## RECOMMENDED CONSUMPTION LEVELS FOR LOW-RISK DRINKING

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 **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.

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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**People with mental health problems are at particular risk of problems with alcohol.**

## YOUR HEALTH AND ALCOHOL