Facts and Furphies

Alcohol use is an accepted and often enjoyable part of our lives and Australian culture. However, the misuse of alcohol is one of the leading causes of preventable death in Australia. Alcohol has also been a major contributor to both mental and physical health problems in the veteran community.

For most veterans who drink at low-risk levels, alcohol is just part of the mix in a healthy lifestyle that includes good diet and regular exercise. In recent research, however, some veterans said that they drink to cope with anger, stress and sleeplessness. Some doctors and veterans believe that veterans drink at more harmful levels than others their age in the general community. A number of Vietnam veterans believe that the effects of alcohol are preferable to dealing with the symptoms of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Veterans also believed that they were more likely to ‘self-medicate’ with alcohol compared to the general community.

Read on to find out more about alcohol and your health, and the truth behind some of the furphies.
1 One drink isn’t always one drink!
The effect of alcohol depends on your age; your body size; your level of fitness; the state of your liver and whether you are a man or a woman. Your reaction to alcohol also depends on what medicines you are taking and how recently you’ve eaten.

2 “A few drinks each day is OK, isn’t it?”
To minimise the chances of experiencing harm from alcohol, it is best to regularly have days without drinking. On those days that you do drink, it is best to drink no more than 2 standard drinks to avoid longer-term harm and death related to alcohol. If it is a special occasion, drinking no more than 4 standard drinks will significantly reduce your chances of experiencing an injury in relation to that drinking occasion.*

3 How does alcohol affect my health?
Excessive alcohol use is related to a variety of physical and mental health and social consequences. Drinking in excess of the guidelines can have a range of short-term health effects and can have a negative impact on:

- The brain
- Stress levels, sleep patterns and sexual function
- The gut and pancreas
- The heart and the circulatory system

Over time, drinking in excess of the guidelines increases your risk of developing:

- Cancer
- Cirrhosis of the liver
- Brain cell damage and memory loss
- Alcohol dependence

4 How does alcohol relate to other mental health conditions, such as depression, anxiety or PTSD?
The relationship between alcohol misuse and other mental health disorders is complex. Alcohol misuse can be a cause of a number of mental health conditions such as alcoholic psychosis, alcohol dependence syndrome and alcohol-related dementia.

Note that these guidelines are for healthy adults. If you have a physical or mental health condition or you are on medication, seek advice from your doctor about a low-risk level of drinking.

* Australian Guidelines to Reduce Health Risks from Drinking Alcohol, National Health and Medical Research Council, 2009
Alcohol dependence or even problem drinking can often make it difficult to assess and treat co-existing mental health disorders such as depression and anxiety disorders, and PTSD.

Most veterans who have tried to control the symptoms of PTSD, anxiety or depression with alcohol know it doesn’t work. In fact most veterans and their partners will agree that alcohol usually makes the symptoms worse. Counselling for PTSD, anxiety and depression is a better option.

5 How does alcohol impact on family and relationships?
Alcohol misuse and problem drinking can have a major impact on family, friends and community. It often contributes to violence and conflict in families. Money spent on alcohol can place additional financial pressures on families.

Where a person is alcohol dependent or has a drinking problem, other family members can feel isolated, unsure about how to help or even how to discuss the impact it is having on their family. However, when a problem drinker wants to do something about their drinking, families, mates and friends are often their most important source of help and support.

6 Does drinking affect my sexual performance?
Yes. Most men know from experience the link between alcohol and erectile dysfunction. Despite this, there is often an assumption that alcohol actually improves sexual activity. This is probably because most of our early sexual encounters involved alcohol. In fact, a pattern of heavy drinking can cause sexual dysfunction, or at least become an issue in relationships.

7 So if I drink at low-risk levels, I’m OK?
Generally yes, but veterans need to take particular care with alcohol if:
- You have heart disease, high blood pressure or are gaining weight
- You are on medication or other drugs
- You have a physical health or social problem made worse by alcohol
- You experience depression, anxiety or posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD)
- You have trouble sleeping
- You experience irritability or mood swings
- Your family has a history of alcohol-related problems
- You are an older person
- You’re going to drive or use machinery

8 Can I save up my drinks and have them all in one go?
No. It is not safe to ‘save up’ your drinks for a couple of days and then have a binge. Because the liver can’t cope with a high level of alcohol, binge drinking is harmful, even if you don’t drink very often. Binge drinking can cause irregular heart beat and increase blood pressure sufficiently to cause a stroke. It can also lead to alcohol-related violence, road accidents and falls.

9 Can I drink when I’m on medication?
You need to take special care with alcohol if you’re on medication. Alcohol can have harmful effects when combined with medication. Your medication may not work as well, or not at all, if you drink. Alcohol can be particularly dangerous when used with other drugs that have similar effects, such as sleeping pills and anti-depressants. You should talk to your doctor or pharmacist about the possible effects of alcohol on your medication.

10 Does alcohol help me sleep?
Alcohol might knock you out for a few hours, but it usually causes a disrupted sleep, early morning waking or insomnia. This may cause anxiety and stress that leads to more drinking.

11 Is beer fattening?
Yes. Beer, like other alcoholic drinks, is high in calories and it contains no nutrients or vitamins. Too much beer can lead to obesity.

12 Is Light beer a better choice than full strength beer?
If you want to cut down the amount of alcohol you drink, then light beer is a better choice. By drinking light beer, you can cut your alcohol intake by about 50%. Nowadays, there’s also a range of low calorie beers available.

13 Can you drink the same amount as you get older?
As you get older, your body doesn’t handle alcohol like it used to. You’ve got less water in your body to absorb the alcohol, so more alcohol stays in our bloodstream, affecting you faster than it used to. Older people should certainly avoid drinking at risky levels. You should also have 1–2 alcohol-free days each week.
What about alcohol and driving?
It is safest not to drink at all if you are going to drive.
You're over the limit if your blood alcohol concentration (BAC) is at or above .05. To stay under .05, generally speaking men should have no more than two standard drinks in the first hour and no more than one standard drink every hour after that. Women should have no more than one standard drink per hour. This advice also applies to the use of any machinery that can cause injury in the case of an accident.

Are there quick ways to sober up?
There is no fast way to sober up. It takes your body about an hour to get rid of one drink. You can't sober up by going to the toilet or vomiting, drinking lots of coffee or water, eating or having a cold shower. All you can do is wait and let your liver do its work. So be careful the morning after as you could be over the drink-driving limit, even if you feel okay.

What's the best cure for a hangover?
Many people claim to have hangover cures, from “hair of the dog” to home made remedies with raw eggs. But there's no magic cure for a hangover. You can't get rid of a hangover, but you can treat the symptoms by:

- Drinking plenty of fluids, especially water.
- Drinking tea and coffee, but follow coffee with water.
- Eating a substantial meal, but avoid fatty foods.
- Taking two paracetamol tablets for the headache.
- Taking some B vitamins or a multi-vitamin.

Do beer and wine have less alcohol than spirits?
Yes. 30mls of spirits has the equivalent alcohol content of a standard glass of full-strength beer (285ml) and a standard glass of wine (100ml).

If I add soft drink to spirits, does it reduce the effects of alcohol?
No. Adding water or soft drink to an alcoholic drink does not decrease the amount of alcohol. But it's a good way of slowing down your drinking.

Does alcohol pep you up or slow you down?
Alcohol is an accepted part of our lifestyle and goes hand in hand with getting together with family and friends. One or two drinks can help us relax and feel less inhibited. However, alcohol is a powerful depressant—it slows you down. Depressant drugs do not necessarily make you feel depressed. Rather, they slow down the messages going to and from the brain and body. This is why we have less control over our behaviour after we've been drinking.

Are there any health benefits from drinking alcohol?
Studies suggest that low level drinking (perhaps as little as 1 standard drink every second day) may reduce the risk of heart disease in older people. However doctors do not advise non-drinkers to take up drinking for heart health! A healthy lifestyle is a smarter choice. Not smoking, increasing exercise and improving diet—a combination of these has more benefits than low level drinking.

What can I do if I want to modify my drinking?
- Don't drink on an empty stomach—eat before and during drinking.
- Set a limit to your drinking time.
- Start with a juice or soft drink to quench your thirst.
- Choose light beer or other low-alcohol drinks.
- Drink slowly and don't top up drinks.
- Refill your own glass.
- Count your standard drinks.
- Have water or other drinks in between alcoholic drinks.
- Drink at your own pace.
- Do something else while you drink—have a meal; play a game of pool or cards.
- Have regular alcohol free days each week.

Where can I go for more information or help?
You can:
- Assess your drinking patterns and get more information at www.therightmix.gov.au.
- Talk to your doctor, pharmacist or other health professional about your health and alcohol.
- Ask for more information or speak to a VVCS* counsellor on: 1800 011 046.

*VVCS—Veterans & Veterans Families Counselling Service is available to all veterans and their families.
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