

Standard drinks and reducing the risks of alcohol

This fact sheet provides an overview of the Australian Alcohol Guidelines for young people and tips on how to minimise the risks.

Did you know?

The Australian Alcohol Guidelines provided by the National Health and Medical Research Council of Australia, recommend that an understanding of standard drinks and of the immediate and lifetime risks of alcohol help minimise the risk of harm.

Key facts

What is a standard drink?

A standard drink contains 10 grams of pure alcohol (12.5 ml of pure alcohol). Different types of alcoholic drinks contain different amounts of pure alcohol. These are all equal to approximately one standard drink:

- Low-alcohol (light) beer (2.7%): 1 1/4 of a 375ml can
- Mid-strength beer (3.5%): 1 stubby, total volume 375ml
- Regular beer (4.9%): 1 pot, 285ml
- Regular beer (4.9%): 2/3 of a 375ml stubby
- White or red wine (12%): 1 small glass, 100ml
- Pre-mixed spirits, ready-to-drink (RTDs), mixed drinks (5.5%): 2/3 of a 340ml bottle
- Mixed drinks: 1 glass, 30ml of spirits (40%) plus mixer
- Spirits or liqueurs (40%): 1 nip, 30ml

Things to remember

- A drink served in some hotels may contain more than one standard drink. Large wine glasses can hold two standard drinks or more.
- A drink served at home may contain more than one standard drink.
- Cocktails can contain as many as five or six standard drinks, depending on the recipe.

What's on the label?

The labels on bottles, cans and casks of alcohol carry important information about the alcohol content of the product you have purchased. This information includes how much actual alcohol (ethyl alcohol) is in the container, and is expressed as:

- a proportion of the total fluid (e.g. regular strength beer contains 4.8% to 5.0% alcohol)
- the number of standard drinks (e.g. a can of regular beer contains approximately 1–1.5 standard drinks).

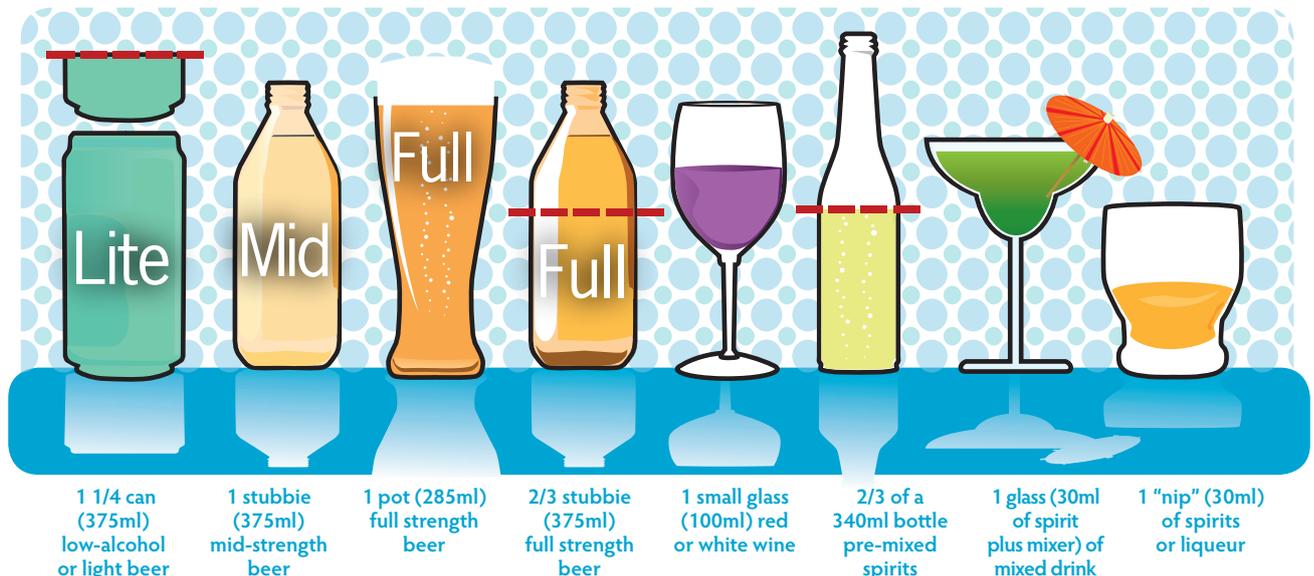
The label may also list other ingredients in the product, such as preservatives, sugar or milk. The label on some pre-mixed drinks also indicates the type of alcohol (wine, vodka, bourbon etc.).

Australian Alcohol Guidelines

The revised Australian Alcohol Guidelines were released in February 2009. They describe the risk



Standard drinks: each one of these drinks equals approximately one standard drink.





of using alcohol over a lifetime as well as the risk of injury on a single occasion of drinking.

For healthy men and women, drinking no more than 2 standard drinks on any day reduces the lifetime risk of harm from alcohol-related disease or injury.

For adults, having no more than 4 standard drinks reduces the risk of injury on a single occasion. (Note that there is no recognised difference between the amount of alcohol used and harms for men and women.)

Is there a safe level of drinking for under-18s?

- There is no guaranteed safe level of drinking alcohol for young people under 18.
- The information which follows provides general guidelines designed for young people under 18 years of age. Young people who are on medication (see [Fact sheet 5: Medicines and alcohol: a dangerous mix](#)), using illicit drugs, have a health condition (physical and/or mental), driving or operating machinery, playing sport or participating in/supervising risky activities (such as diving or rock climbing) or young women who are pregnant are advised that the risks of drinking alcohol could well be greater for them, compared with another young person.

Guidelines for children and young people under 18 years

- Research suggests that, for children and adolescents under 18, not drinking alcohol is the safest option. The risks are just too great. [Fact sheet 1: Alcohol and adolescent development](#) explains some of the long-term harms associated with teenage drinking.
- The Guidelines advise parents and carers that children under 15 years of age are at the greatest risk of harm from drinking and that for this age group, not drinking is especially important.
- For young people aged 15–17 years, the safest option, apart from not drinking alcohol, is to delay beginning to drink alcohol for as long as possible.

Health risks for young people

- **Short term or immediate risks**—depending on how much a person drinks, he or she could suffer reduced concentration, slower reflexes, reduced coordination, poor muscle control, intense moods, confusion, blurred vision, nausea, vomiting, coma or even death. Relating the effects of alcohol to possible actions and consequences from situations involving driving and decision making are useful considerations for young people.
- **Binge drinking**—is drinking heavily over a short period of time, drinking continuously over a number of days or weeks, or drinking to get drunk. Binge drinking is harmful because it results in immediate and severe intoxication. As well as the health risks, it can lead to young people taking unnecessary risks and putting themselves and others in danger of injury, violence, or accidental death. Common effects of binge-drinking episodes are hangovers, headaches, shakiness, nausea, vomiting, 'blacking out' and passing out.

- **Long term or lifetime health risks**—excessive patterns of drinking over time can cause heart disease, cancers (especially of the mouth, throat and oesophagus), liver disease, brain damage and memory loss, sexual dysfunction, including male impotency and risks to the unborn child, where the drinker is pregnant.

Additional risks for young people

- Alcohol use increases risk of dependence (sometimes called 'addiction') and brain damage. The changes that occur to the brain during adolescence make young people more vulnerable to the dependent actions of drugs, including alcohol. Until the approximate age of 25, the brain is particularly vulnerable to the damage that can be caused by alcohol. (See [Fact sheet 1: Alcohol and adolescent development](#).) The possible effect of drinking alcohol on a young person's learning could well be therefore of concern.
- Alcohol lowers inhibitions. A teenager who drinks excessively or gets drunk can find him/herself doing things he/she may not normally even consider. The young person may be at risk of unplanned or unwanted sex and/or unwanted pregnancy. He/she may suffer social embarrassment or exclusion through, for example, fighting or vomiting in public.
- Alcohol can affect the condition of skin and hair, and thus can affect the young person's appearance.
- The calorie content of alcoholic drinks can lead to weight gain.
- Heavy drinking over time can lead to problems with family, friends, relationships, finances, school/work and the law.

Special considerations and tips

- If they choose to drink, it's helpful for young people to know how they can stay in control of what and how much they drink. It is useful for them to know what a standard drink is for each type of alcohol. (See diagram on page one).
- Remember that the effects of alcohol vary from person to person, depending on how much or how quickly they drink, whether they are taking other drugs (including medication) at the same time and so on. How alcohol affects the teenager also depends on whether he or she is used to drinking, his/her mood, age, weight, sex and general health.

Further information/Where to get help

- For further information about the effects of alcohol, standard drinks and low-risk drinking, see www.druginfo.adf.org.au.
- For counselling services, contact 1300 131 340
- For tips on communicating with your teenager about alcohol, see [Fact sheet 6: Which parental factors influence young people's choices about alcohol?](#) and [Fact sheet 7: Teenage drinking: Parents' communication style can make a difference](#)
- For additional copies of this fact sheet and information about the Guidelines see <http://www.decs.sa.gov.au/drugstrategy> >resources>alcohol education or parent support

