

# 20 Alcohol-related disease

## Disease characteristics

It is estimated that 77% of Australians consume alcohol, making it the most widely used drug in Australia. Thirty-six per cent of those consuming alcohol will usually do so at what is considered a harmful rate (over four standard drinks per day for males, over two standard drinks per day for females, and less than two alcohol-free days per week) (DHAC 2000a).

Alcohol consumption is considered by many health officials to be an important and intractable problem. The use of alcohol in Australian society cuts across a wide range of social groups, and it plays a role in most social gatherings and celebrations. Attributing related deaths is difficult (Makkai & McAllister 1998). However, it is presently causally linked to death from 35 diseases (see Appendix Table D.6).

Using data from the 1995 National Drug Survey, Makkai and McAllister found that while there did not appear to be a significant difference between the sexes in harmful/hazardous drinking. Males were more likely to indicate that they were moderate drinkers, and females were more likely to indicate that they were non-drinkers. They also found that for the period 1988–1995, the level of heavy drinking declined and the level of abstinence increased.

Deaths due to alcohol-related disease represented about 3.5% of all deaths, and 67,000 PYLL (about 7%) before the age of 75 making alcohol related disease a major cause of death in Australia. However, these results need to be offset against the known benefits of moderate alcohol consumption.

## Age–sex distribution

The causes of death causally linked to alcohol are listed in Appendix Table D6.

There are about 3,500 deaths each year due to alcohol-related disease. In 1998, there were 2,344 male deaths and 1,193 female deaths attributed to alcohol consumption. The rate of death attributable to alcohol for males (252 deaths per million population) was 2.4 times the rate for females (104).

Mortality rates for males were highest among those aged 15–29, largely due to accidents and injuries involving consumption of alcohol, and for ages 50 and over, largely related to chronic alcohol consumption. For women, the effect of alcohol-related accidents and injuries was not so great and mortality rates generally increased with age, particularly from age 65 onwards (Table 20.1; Figure 20.2).

## Twelve-year trends 1987–1998

Over the period 1987–1998, there was a significant downward trend in deaths due to alcohol-related disease. There was a significant decrease in mortality rates for males of 2.6% each year, with significant decreases for males aged 5 years and older. The decrease for females was 1.7% per year, with significant decreases for females aged between 20–29, 45–49 and aged 55 years and over (Table 20.1; Figure 20.1).

Comparisons by State and Territory, geographic region, Indigenous origin, country of birth and socioeconomic status have not been made for deaths attributable to excessive consumption of alcohol.

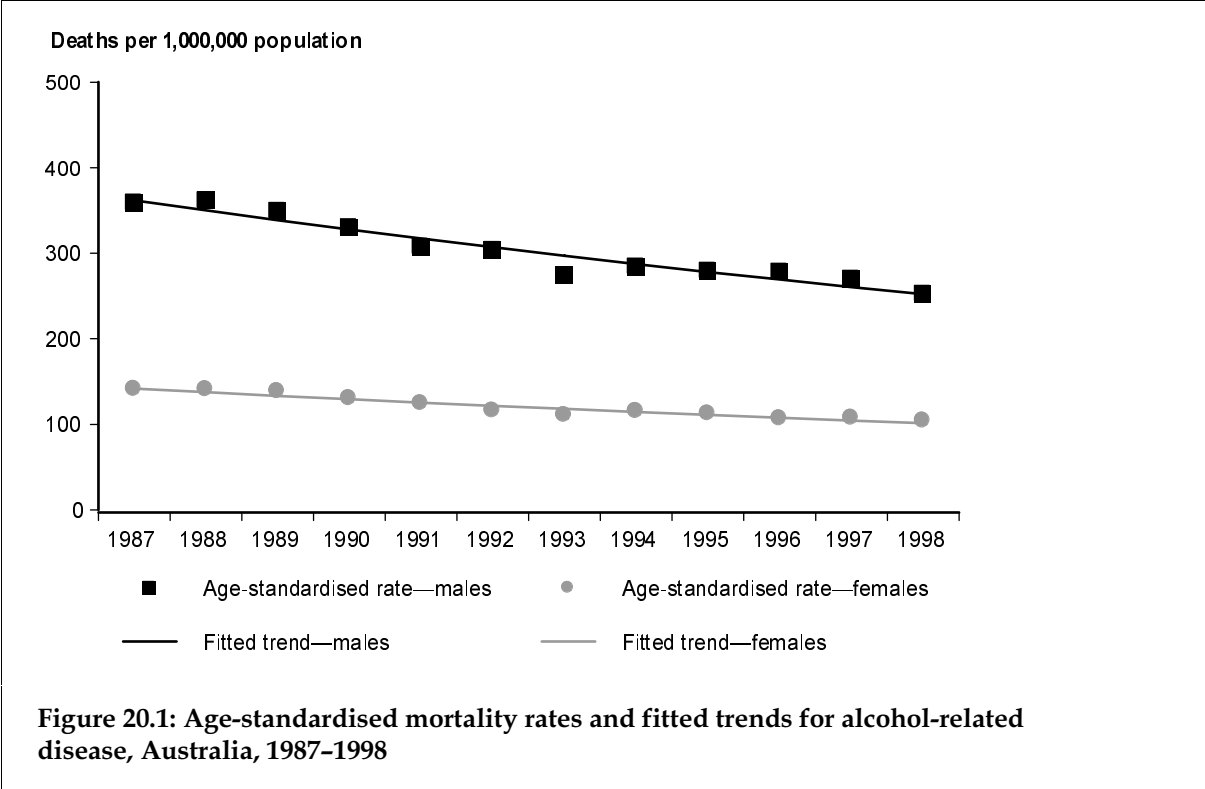


Figure 20.1: Age-standardised mortality rates and fitted trends for alcohol-related disease, Australia, 1987-1998

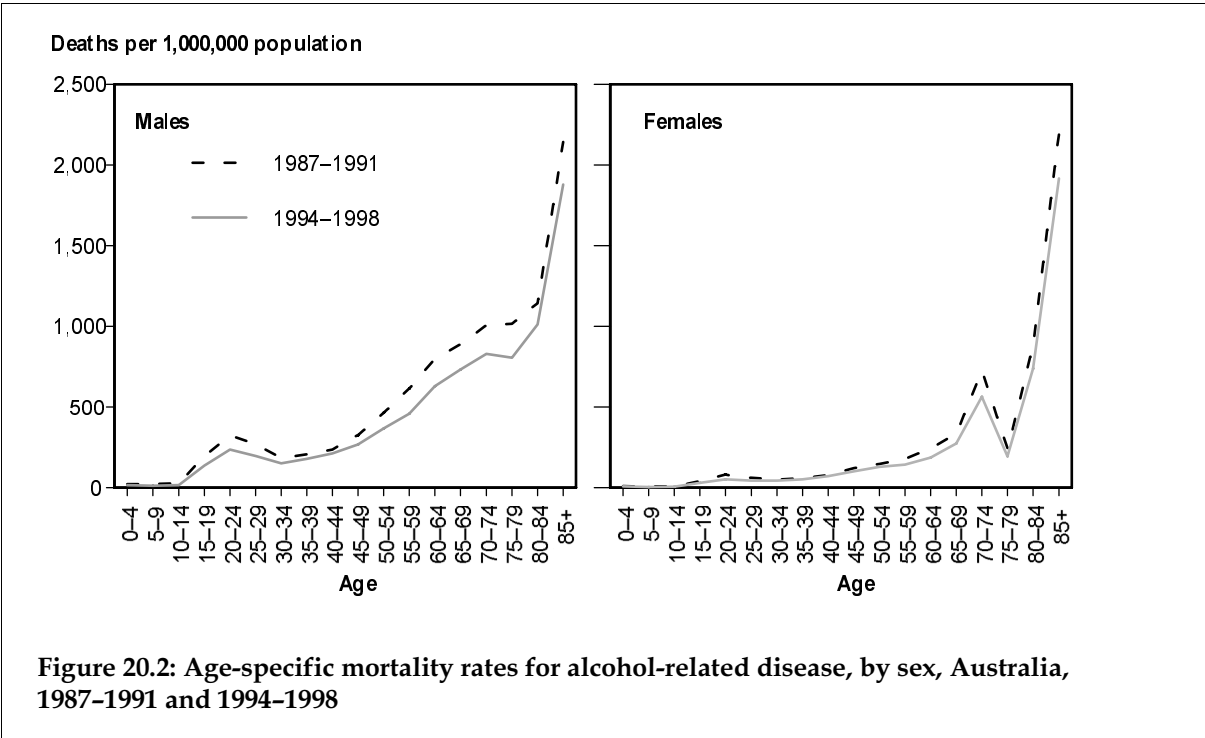


Figure 20.2: Age-specific mortality rates for alcohol-related disease, by sex, Australia, 1987-1991 and 1994-1998

Table 20.1: Age-specific and age-standardised mortality rates for alcohol-related disease per million population, Australia, 1987–1998

Year	Age																	ASMR Aust 1991		
	0-4	5-9	10-14	15-19	20-24	25-29	30-34	35-39	40-44	45-49	50-54	55-59	60-64	65-69	70-74	75-79	80-84		85+	Crude rate
	<b>Males</b>																			
1987	26	22	30	209	347	246	177	208	247	379	537	713	894	882	1,074	1,009	1,205	2,043	336	359
1988	25	24	30	217	368	303	195	205	296	320	477	573	858	869	1,085	1,120	1,178	2,335	338	361
1989	17	20	28	207	342	295	190	231	200	315	485	615	757	949	1,009	1,058	1,231	2,352	327	349
1990	24	26	23	177	305	278	186	190	227	326	445	594	767	875	991	954	1,027	2,204	311	330
1991	15	18	21	165	269	226	174	196	221	300	391	578	726	871	887	949	1,098	1,815	291	307
1992	15	18	18	140	242	216	158	173	235	289	443	529	731	945	870	943	1,143	1,902	289	304
1993	21	12	15	145	236	214	145	189	199	270	400	469	577	741	857	820	870	1,930	263	274
1994	14	10	18	140	230	205	134	193	226	267	344	501	668	756	888	944	1,136	2,006	273	284
1995	15	15	16	137	255	200	146	188	198	270	374	489	649	768	833	842	1,007	2,002	271	279
1996	19	12	19	142	244	188	169	189	216	277	390	452	648	707	862	767	1,099	1,896	273	278
1997	18	10	15	144	229	195	150	162	225	288	389	442	612	741	845	748	976	1,695	268	270
1998	13	10	13	122	219	197	155	168	203	241	350	423	576	671	726	747	840	1,841	252	252
	<b>Females</b>																			
1987	11	9	10	43	86	62	54	59	86	137	144	171	238	335	785	219	960	2,420	152	141
1988	11	10	9	42	92	70	50	58	87	142	154	183	280	294	754	282	894	2,176	152	141
1989	12	10	8	38	78	55	52	62	88	116	143	184	247	327	738	291	927	2,372	151	138
1990	8	11	8	38	76	51	38	63	58	115	157	179	224	366	708	228	849	2,174	142	130
1991	9	5	5	37	73	72	50	55	71	98	144	178	234	344	650	185	820	1,857	136	124
1992	7	5	6	31	70	54	44	53	52	111	129	159	221	315	598	170	748	1,986	130	116
1993	8	7	7	31	56	34	47	55	51	83	130	165	202	298	622	166	779	1,840	126	110
1994	13	7	5	27	51	45	39	55	73	133	112	149	245	277	568	207	782	1,990	134	115
1995	5	6	8	31	56	51	47	47	73	103	133	160	174	281	586	190	757	1,957	132	112
1996	7	6	6	28	43	43	33	47	67	97	126	160	187	271	566	191	734	1,868	127	106
1997	5	4	6	30	57	45	53	50	86	95	145	119	157	263	538	182	720	1,871	129	107
1998	8	2	4	34	49	38	49	56	58	89	127	132	161	274	532	206	676	1,860	127	104

Note: ASMR = age-standardised mortality rate.