

# 5 Use of alcohol

## Introduction

Alcohol is the second greatest cause of drug-related deaths and hospitalisations in Australia. In 1998, the number of deaths attributed to alcohol consumption was estimated to be 3,271 (AIHW: Miller & Draper 2001). For the same year, the number of hospital separations attributable to alcohol consumption was about 43,000 (AIHW: Ridolfo & Stevenson 2001).

The average age at which males first consumed a full glass of alcohol was 16.2 years, whereas for females it was 17.6 years.

In 2001 the average amount of money spent by recent drinkers on alcohol was \$19.56 per week.

The National Health & Medical Research Council's *Australian Alcohol Guidelines* (NHMRC 2001) outline patterns of drinking associated with risk of alcohol-related harm. The risk of harm (particularly injury or death) in the short term is associated with given levels of drinking on a single day. The level of long-term risk is associated with regular daily patterns of drinking, defined by the total amount of alcohol typically consumed per week. Low risk is a level of drinking at which there is only a minimal risk of harm, and there may be health benefits for some of the population. Risky levels are those at which risk of harm is significantly increased beyond any possible benefits. High-risk drinking levels are those at which there is substantial risk of serious harm, and risk increases rapidly as these levels are surpassed.

**Table 5.1: National Health & Medical Research Council Australian alcohol guidelines**

	Low risk	Risky	High risk
	(Standard drinks)		
<b>Risk of harm in the short term</b>			
Males	Up to 6 (on any one day, no more than 3 days per week)	7 to 10 (on any one day)	11 or more (on any one day)
Females	Up to 4 (on any one day, no more than 3 days per week)	5 to 6 (on any one day)	7 or more (on any one day)
<b>Risk of harm in the long term</b>			
Males			
On an average day	Up to 4 (per day)	5 to 6 (per day)	7 or more (per day)
Overall weekly level	Up to 28 (per week)	29 to 42 (per week)	43 or more (per week)
Females			
On an average day	Up to 2 (per day)	3 to 4 (per day)	5 or more (per day)
Overall weekly level	Up to 14 (per week)	15 to 28 (per week)	29 or more (per week)

Source: NHMRC 2001.

## Alcohol consumption risk status

In 2001, 17.5% of Australians aged 14 years and over had not consumed alcohol in the previous 12 months. Among those who had consumed alcohol, some drank at levels of potential harm in the short term on at least one occasion in the last 12 months, some in the long term only and others at both (Table 5.2):

- Almost one in two (46.8%) Australians drank at levels considered at low risk of harm in the short and long term.
- One-quarter (25.9%) of the population drank at low-risk levels for alcohol-related harm in the long term but risky or high-risk levels for short-term harm.
- Less than one in 10 (8.5%) drank at levels considered risky or high risk for both short-term and long-term harm.

**Table 5.2: Risk of harm in the long term by risk of harm in the short term on at least one occasion in the past 12 months, persons aged 14 years and over, Australia, 2001**

Long-term risk	Abstainer	Short-term risk		Total
		Low risk	Risky or high risk	
		(per cent)		
Abstainer	17.5	–	–	17.5
Low risk	–	46.8	25.9	72.7
Risky or high risk	–	1.3	8.5	9.8
<b>Total</b>	<b>17.5</b>	<b>48.1</b>	<b>34.4</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Note: Base equals total population.

- The proportions of males and females drinking at risky or high-risk levels for harm in the long term were similar (10.2% and 9.4% respectively).
- People in the 20–29 years age group were most likely to consume alcohol in a way that puts them at risk for long-term alcohol-related harm. This age group was also the least likely to abstain from alcohol.
- At all ages, greater proportions of the population drink at levels that are risky or high risk for short-term harm compared with risk for long-term harm.
- Males (39.3%) were more likely than females (29.6%) to drink, on at least one occasion in the last 12 months, at levels that put them at risk for short-term alcohol-related harm.

## Type of alcohol consumed

Those who had consumed alcohol in the last 12 months were asked in 2001 what type of alcohol they usually drank:

- Males drinking at low or risky and high-risk levels of harm in the long term most commonly consumed regular strength beer, except for those aged 40 years and over who commonly drank bottled wine (Table 5.3).
- For females, the type of drink most commonly consumed by those at low or risky and high risk of harm in the short term was the same as for those who consumed at low or risky or high risk of harm in the long term. The types of drink ranged from pre-mixed bottles to bottled spirits and liqueurs to bottled wine.
- Male teenagers drinking at low or risky and high-risk levels for harm in the short or long term most commonly drank regular strength beer. Female teenagers drinking at low-risk levels of harm in the short or long term most commonly drank pre-mixed bottles, whereas those who drank at risky or high-risk levels most commonly drank bottled spirits and liqueurs.

**Table 5.3: Type of alcohol consumed, recent drinkers aged 14 years and over, by long-term risk status, Australia, 2001**

Age group	Long-term risk	
	Low risk	Risky and high risk
<b>Males</b>		
14–19	Regular strength beer	Regular strength beer
20–29	Regular strength beer	Regular strength beer
30–39	Regular strength beer	Regular strength beer
40+	Bottled wine	Regular strength beer
<b>Females</b>		
14–19	Pre-mixed bottles	Bottled spirits and liqueurs
20–29	Bottled spirits and liqueurs	Bottled spirits and liqueurs
30–39	Bottled wine	Bottled wine
40+	Bottled wine	Bottled wine

Note: Base equals recent drinkers.

- The type of alcohol usually drunk by each sex, age group and risk level did not vary between risk of harm in the short term and risk in the long term, with the exception of males aged 20–29 years who preferred bottled spirits and liqueurs.

## Usual place of use of alcohol

Those who had consumed alcohol in the last 12 months were asked where they usually drank alcohol (Table 5.4):

- The most commonly nominated usual place for consuming alcohol was in the home. The proportion of male and female drinkers usually consuming alcohol in their home increased with age.
- The proportions nominating private parties as the usual place of alcohol consumption decreases with age. Private parties are the most common locations for the consumption of alcohol by teenagers.
- The proportions usually consuming in restaurants and/or cafes peaks at 30–39 years, and for licensed premises (pubs, clubs) proportions peaked at 20–29 years.

**Table 5.4: Usual place of consumption of alcohol, recent drinkers aged 14 years and over, by age and sex, Australia, 2001**

Location	14–19		20–29		30–39		40+	
	Males	Females	Males	Females	Males	Females	Males	Females
	(per cent)							
In my home	61.5	61.1	74.3	76.6	85.5	84.4	88.7	84.4
At friend's house	62.9	63.9	67.7	66.2	64.2	65.4	48.4	52.4
At private parties	67.8	70.2	62.7	60.7	54.0	55.4	39.6	43.3
At raves/dance parties	22.9	24.5	18.0	12.2	4.2	3.1	2.2	1.3
At restaurants/cafes	22.4	25.5	55.4	61.6	57.3	63.1	48.7	56.9
At licensed premises	37.1	38.8	75.5	73.7	59.9	51.1	46.9	37.6
At school/TAFE/university, etc.	6.2	3.4	6.3	2.7	0.7	0.3	0.3	0.4
At workplace	5.8	2.7	14.3	8.6	14.0	4.7	5.5	2.7
In public places	14.1	10.6	8.5	2.9	4.2	2.9	2.2	1.4
In a car	12.2	7.0	8.8	2.5	4.3	1.3	1.3	0.3
Somewhere else	8.3	7.2	5.1	1.6	3.3	1.1	1.6	0.9

### Notes

1. Base equals recent drinkers.
2. Respondents could select more than one response.

## Moderating drinking behaviour

Those who consumed alcohol in the last 12 months were asked if they undertook any measures to limit their blood alcohol levels. The proportions that always or most of the time undertook these measures varied between age and sex (Table 5.5):

- The proportion of recent drinkers who always or most of the time made a point of eating while consuming alcohol increased with age. In all age groups females were more likely than males to undertake this behaviour.
- Higher proportions of females in each age group compared with males always or most of the time limited the number of drinks they had (e.g. when driving). For both males and females, the proportions who do so increased with age.
- For all age groups, higher proportions of females compared with males always or most of the time refused an alcoholic drink when it was offered but they didn't want it. The proportions that did refuse increased with age.

**Table 5.5: Blood alcohol limiting measures undertaken always or most of the times, recent drinkers aged 14 years and over, by age and sex, Australia, 2001**

Measure	14–19		20–29		30–39		40+	
	Males	Females	Males	Females	Males	Females	Males	Females
	(per cent)							
Count number of drinks consumed	55.5	52.0	49.2	57.5	50.4	61.3	53.4	65.1
Alternate between alcohol and non-alcoholic drinks	17.7	23.3	15.3	26.6	16.9	34.0	15.8	37.0
Make a point of eating while consuming	43.7	43.8	43.1	57.9	53.1	70.2	59.4	74.1
Quench thirst before having alcohol	27.5	30.4	30.3	40.5	29.4	44.4	23.5	41.9
Drink low-alcohol drinks only	9.2	20.4	11.2	11.4	17.3	13.1	32.0	22.2
Limit number of drinks	51.5	56.0	69.7	79.9	80.0	89.5	88.2	91.6
Refuse alcoholic drink offered when not want it	47.0	60.2	50.9	72.5	54.0	74.2	61.1	75.6

*Notes*

1. Base equals recent drinkers.
2. Respondents could select more than one response.

## Alcohol-induced memory lapse

Those who had consumed alcohol in the last 12 months were asked how often they had been unable to remember afterwards what happened while they were drinking (Table 5.6):

- Compared to all other age groups, teenagers were most likely to have had an incident where they could not remember afterwards what happened while drinking, at least weekly (4.4%) and at least monthly (10.9%).
- On at least one occasion in the last 12 months, one in nine (11.9%) male drinkers aged 40 years and over and fewer than one in 10 (6.6%) female drinkers aged 40 years and over had been unable to remember afterwards what happened while drinking.

**Table 5.6: Loss of memory after drinking at least once in the last 12 months, recent drinkers aged 14 years and over, by age and sex, Australia, 2001**

Age group	Frequency			
	At least weekly	At least monthly	At least once in last 12 months	Never
(per cent)				
<b>Males</b>				
14–19	5.5	10.7	27.4	56.5
20–29	4.6	10.2	33.2	52.1
30–39	3.4	4.2	22.5	69.9
40+	3.1	2.6	11.9	82.3
<b>Females</b>				
14–19	3.4	11.1	29.5	55.9
20–29	2.6	5.0	28.0	64.5
30–39	2.6	1.7	13.6	82.1
40+	1.6	1.0	6.6	90.7
<b>Persons</b>				
14–19	4.4	10.9	28.4	56.2
20–29	3.6	7.7	30.6	58.1
30–39	3.0	3.0	18.1	76.0
40+	2.4	1.8	9.4	86.3

Note: Base equals recent drinkers.

## Alcohol reduction

### Methods of reduction

Those who had consumed alcohol in the last 12 months were asked if they had reduced the amount of alcohol or number of times they drank, consumed more low-alcohol drinks, or ceased drinking (Table 5.7):

- Males at low risk of alcohol-related harm in the short and long term were more likely than females at low risk to have reduced the amount of alcohol drunk per session, to have reduced the number of sessions, drunk more low-alcohol drinks and to have stopped drinking.
- Females drinking at risky or high-risk levels for alcohol-related harm in the short and long term were more likely than males drinking at risky or high risk levels to have reduced the amount drunk per session, reduced the number of times they drank and stopped drinking. However, these males were more likely than females to have drunk more low-alcohol drinks.

**Table 5.7: Reduction in alcohol consumption, recent drinkers aged 14 years and over, by short- and long-term risk status, Australia, 2001**

Measure	Short-term risk		Long-term risk	
	Low risk	Risky or high risk	Low risk	Risky or high risk
(per cent)				
<b>Males</b>				
Reduced amount drunk per session	26.3	31.0	28.2	29.8
Reduced the number of times drunk	22.9	31.5	27.5	21.7
Drank more low-alcohol drinks	12.5	12.8	12.8	11.2
Stopped drinking	3.2	2.4	2.9	2.5
None of the above	54.1	49.7	51.7	54.8
<b>Females</b>				
Reduced amount drunk per session	21.5	35.5	25.4	36.0
Reduced the number of times drunk	20.6	34.1	25.0	29.9
Drank more low-alcohol drinks	6.0	6.7	6.0	8.0
Stopped drinking	5.2	4.1	5.0	3.2
None of the above	61.9	48.4	58.0	48.6
<b>Persons</b>				
Reduced amount drunk per session	23.8	33.0	26.9	32.8
Reduced the number of times drunk	21.7	32.6	26.3	25.7
Drank more low-alcohol drinks	9.1	10.1	9.5	9.6
Stopped drinking	4.2	3.1	3.9	2.8
None of the above	58.1	49.1	54.8	51.8

*Notes*

1. Base equals recent drinkers.
2. Respondents could select more than one response.

## Reasons for reduction

Respondents who undertook any of the alcohol reduction methods above (Table 5.7) were asked why they did so (Table 5.8):

- For all groups, the main reason nominated was for health reasons. Those drinking at risky or high-risk levels for harm in the long term were more likely than those drinking at low-risk levels to nominate health reasons. The opposite was true for those drinking at risk of harm in the short term.
- Lifestyle and social reasons were the next most commonly nominated reasons for alcohol reduction.

**Table 5.8: Reason for reduction in alcohol consumption, recent drinkers aged 14 years and over, by short- and long-term risk status, Australia, 2001**

Reason	Males		Females		Persons	
	Low risk	Risky or high risk	Low risk	Risky or high risk	Low risk	Risky or high risk
(per cent)						
<b>Short-term risk</b>						
Health reasons	27.5	25.3	30.6	25.7	29.0	25.5
Lifestyle reasons	15.0	22.5	12.0	17.4	13.6	20.2
Social reasons	19.6	18.1	15.9	18.0	17.9	18.0
Pregnant and/or breastfeeding	..	..	11.0	7.8	..	..
Prefer low-alcohol drinks, not to get drunk	10.6	5.5	7.6	4.5	9.2	5.1
Drink driving regulations	15.2	13.0	8.8	10.3	12.1	11.8
Financial reasons	6.6	10.9	5.8	10.2	6.2	10.6
Peer pressure	0.7	0.7	0.5	0.8	0.6	0.7
Other	4.7	4.1	7.7	5.3	6.1	4.6
<b>Long-term risk</b>						
Health reasons	26.2	28.3	27.7	32.4	26.9	30.4
Lifestyle reasons	19.0	15.5	15.0	11.3	17.2	13.3
Social reasons	19.0	18.3	16.6	18.6	17.9	18.4
Pregnant and/or breastfeeding	–	–	10.5	3.9	4.8	2.1
Prefer low-alcohol drinks, not to get drunk	8.6	5.3	6.5	4.5	7.6	4.9
Drink driving regulations	14.1	13.9	9.1	11.2	11.9	12.5
Financial reasons	8.1	12.7	7.3	10.7	7.7	11.6
Peer pressure	0.6	1.2	0.3	2.5	0.5	1.9
Other	4.3	4.9	6.9	4.8	5.5	4.9

Note: Base equals recent drinkers who had undertaken at least one measure to reduce their level of alcohol consumption in the last 12 months.

## Characteristics by alcohol risk status

In 2001, the characteristics of abstainers and those who consumed alcohol varied according to the level and pattern of alcohol consumption (Table 5.9):

- Those with post-school qualifications were more likely than those without to drink at risky or high-risk levels for both short-term and long-term alcohol-related harm.
- A higher proportion of unemployed persons consumed alcohol at risky/high-risk levels for harm in the short and long term than other employment status groups.
- Compared with those in urban areas, higher proportions of people from rural/remote areas drank at risky/high-risk levels for both short-term and long-term alcohol-related harm.
- Those whose main language spoken at home was English were more likely than those whose main language was not English to drink at risky/high-risk levels for both short-term and long-term alcohol-related harm.
- With regard to socioeconomic status, those who were the most socioeconomically advantaged were least likely to be abstainers.



**Table 5.9: Characteristics by short- and long-term risk status, persons aged 14 years and over, Australia, 2001**

Characteristic	Short-term risk			Long-term risk	
	Abstainer /ex-drinker	Low risk	Risky or high risk	Low risk	Risky or high risk
	(per cent)				
<b>Education</b>					
Without post-school qualification	21.7	45.8	32.5	68.6	9.7
With post-school qualification	13.1	49.8	37.1	76.9	10.0
<b>Labour force status</b>					
Currently employed	10.6	46.7	42.8	78.5	11.0
Student	26.4	29.7	43.8	64.0	9.6
Unemployed	14.2	41.2	44.6	68.0	17.8
Retired/pension/home duties	25.8	57.9	16.2	67.1	7.1
<b>Main language spoken at home</b>					
English	15.7	48.3	36.0	74.0	10.3
Other	40.8	44.9	14.3	55.9	3.3
<b>Socioeconomic status</b>					
1st quintile	21.1	47.1	31.9	68.9	10.0
2nd quintile	19.5	48.2	32.2	70.6	9.9
3rd quintile	17.2	47.3	35.5	72.9	9.9
4th quintile	16.2	47.4	36.3	73.6	10.2
5th quintile	13.6	49.6	36.8	77.2	9.2
<b>Geography</b>					
Urban	17.6	48.5	33.9	73.2	9.3
Rural/remote	17.4	46.8	35.8	71.3	11.3
<b>Marital status</b>					
Never married	18.2	30.8	51.0	67.6	14.2
Divorced/separated/widowed	23.0	53.9	23.1	67.1	9.9
Married/de facto	16.1	54.3	29.6	76.0	8.0
<b>Indigenous status</b>					
Indigenous	20.6	30.7	48.7	59.5	19.9
Non-Indigenous	17.3	48.4	34.3	73.0	9.7