

**Diary**

## Alcohol is the most widely used psychoactive, or mood altering, recreational drug in Australia.

Drinking alcohol plays a regular role in a lot of people's lives; however, it is not that different to any other drug; such as aspirin, nicotine, cannabis, sleeping pills, or even speed and ice. Drinking too much alcohol can result in a number of health and social harms for individuals and the people around them.

For example, the 2019 National Drug Strategy Household survey found that:

- 29.7% of respondents drank at a level that might be considered hazardous or harmful
- Of respondents who had 11 or more drinks on any one occasion at least once a year, 8% sustained an injury requiring medical attention
- 21.4% of respondents had been victims of an alcohol-related incident in the previous 12 months<sup>1</sup>

If you think that your drinking is affecting your health and causing harms to yourself and your family or friends, then this guide may be able to help you. It provides information about how to identify if you are drinking too much, and advice on how to either reduce your alcohol consumption or quit drinking.

The information in this booklet is offered for general purposes and should not be considered a substitute for specific, professional advice.

## How do I know if my drinking is harmful?

### We know that drinking too much can be harmful, but how much is too much and how do we recognise this?

Excessive or harmful drinking is not just a matter of how much a person drinks, but also why they drink, and how their drinking affects their life.

Listed below are some questions adapted from the World Health Organization's Alcohol Use Disorders Identification Test (AUDIT)<sup>2</sup>.

If you answer yes to any of these questions your drinking could be causing some harm to yourself or others.

#### Do you find it difficult to stop drinking once you have started?

For example:

- Do you drink more than you plan to drink?
- Afterwards do you feel guilty?

#### Are you often unable to remember what happened the night before because of your drinking?

#### Do you experience withdrawal symptoms when you have had a break from drinking?

**For example:**

- Do you drink to avoid withdrawal symptoms?
- See "Coping with withdrawal" on page 7 for more information.

#### Are there times when you feel you need to have a drink to cope?

**For example:**

- Do you feel you need a drink to help you sleep?

#### Does your drinking affect your relationships, home-life, work or school?

**For example:**

- Have you missed work or school because of your drinking?
- Does your drinking cause arguments with family and friends?
- Have you or someone else been injured because of your drinking?

#### Has a relative, friend or health care worker shown concern about your drinking?

#### Have you experienced any of the negative health effects of alcohol?

**For example:**

- See the section on "What can happen when you drink too much?" on page 4 for more information.

1. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. (2020). *National Drug Strategy Household Survey 2019*. Canberra: AIHW.

2 Babor TF, Higgins-Biddle JC, Saunders JB & Monteiro MG 2001 AUDIT—The alcohol use disorders identification test: guidelines for use in primary care, 2nd ed. Geneva: World Health Organization

## How much do you drink?

The National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) has developed new draft guidelines to reduce health risks from drinking alcohol.<sup>3</sup>

The guidelines recommend:

- To reduce the risk of harm from alcohol-related disease or injury for healthy men and women, drink no more than 10 standard drinks per week and no more than 4 standard drinks on any one day.

Situations where drinking increases the immediate risk of harm include:

- Women who are pregnant, planning a pregnancy or breastfeeding.
- When undertaking or supervising activities that require a high level of attention, such as water activities, driving, watching children or operating machinery.

The safest option is not to drink when you are in these situations.

More information about the guidelines is available at [www.adf.org.au](http://www.adf.org.au)

## Standard drinks

Not all drinks contain the same concentration of alcohol. You can calculate how much alcohol you are drinking by using “standard drinks”.

A standard drink is one that contains 10 grams of pure alcohol. Some examples of a standard drink include:



**285 ml (a “pot”, “middy” or “handle”) of full strength beer (4.8% alc./vol.)**



**375 ml (a stubby or can) of low strength beer (3.5% alc./vol.)**



**100 ml (a small glass) of wine (13.5% alc./vol.)**



**30 ml (a nip) of spirits (40% alc./vol.)**

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<https://www.health.gov.au/health-topics/alcohol/about-alcohol/standard-drinks-guide>

If you are unsure how many standard drinks your drink contains check on the label or ask the bar tender.

If you're at someone's house pour your own drinks.

3. National Health and Medical Research Council Draft Australian Guidelines to Reduce Health Risks from Drinking Alcohol, Canberra: National Health and Medical Research Council, 2020

## What can happen when you drink too much?

Alcohol can cause issues in many areas of your life.

For example:

- Relationships and family – arguments over drinking and behaviour while drunk.
- Work or school – excessive alcohol consumption can cause health issues such as hangovers, which can result in taking extra days off and poor performance, including an increased risk of accidents with machinery and vehicles.
- Finances – spending too much money on alcohol or fines from legal issues can impact on finances.
- Health – either through injuring yourself while under the influence of alcohol (such as drink driving, getting into a fight, or falling over) or due to heavy consumption over time.

## Short-term health effects

Many people think alcohol is a stimulant drug because after a few drinks they become livelier and less inhibited. In fact, alcohol has a depressant effect. This does not necessarily mean it makes you feel depressed but it slows down the messages travelling between the brain and the body. It can make you feel happier or sadder, depending on your mood.

In the short-term, the effects of moderate levels of alcohol can include:

- feeling relaxed
- trouble concentrating
- slower reflexes
- increased confidence
- feeling happier or sadder, depending on your mood.

If a large amount of alcohol is consumed the following may be experienced:

- confusion
- blurred vision
- clumsiness
- memory loss
- feeling sick and vomiting
- passing out
- coma
- death.

Alcohol causes long term damage to many parts of the body...

## Long-term health effects

Heavy consumption of alcohol over time can damage many parts of the body. Some of the damage can be permanent.

Organ	Damage
Brain	brain injury, loss of memory, reduced ability to plan, confusion, hallucinations
Mouth, throat, oesophagus, lips	cancer
Heart	high blood pressure, irregular pulse, enlarged heart
Blood	changes in red blood cells
Muscles	weakness, loss of muscle tissue
Skin, body	flushing, sweating, bruising, weight gain (alcohol has a high calorie content)
Nervous system	tingling and loss of sensation in hands and feet
Lungs	greater chance of infections
Stomach, intestines	inflamed lining, bleeding, ulcers, diarrhoea
Liver	severe swelling and pain, hepatitis, cirrhosis, cancer
Pancreas	painful inflammation
Male sexual organs	impotence, shrinking of testicles, damaged/reduced sperm
Female sexual organs	greater risk of gynaecological problems, irregular menstrual periods, damage to fetus if pregnant

## Planning to change your drinking patterns

**Planning what you are going to do, setting some goals and having some support will make things easier.**

The following section outlines some of the things to consider when you are planning to change your drinking patterns. Each section raises an issue that needs to be considered:

- What are the advantages and disadvantages of changing your drinking patterns?
- Why do you drink?
- What do you want to achieve?
- Make sure you have support
- Coping with withdrawal
- Strategies for changing your drinking patterns
- Coping with the urge to drink and relapse.

At any stage of planning to change or changing your drinking patterns your health professional can provide assistance. They can check your health, discuss your options, help you set goals, and provide support and referrals.

## Advantages and disadvantages of changing your drinking patterns

To help you decide what to do about your drinking it might be helpful to write down the advantages and disadvantages of changing your drinking patterns.

Think about your list. Are there more advantages to changing your drinking patterns than disadvantages? How significant are the disadvantages?

This list of advantages and disadvantages can be used later to help you focus on your goals if you are struggling. Some examples are already listed in the table to help get you started.

### Advantages of changing your drinking patterns

- No more hangovers.
- More money to spend on other things.
- No more arguments with family and friends about what I did while I was drunk.

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### Disadvantages of changing your drinking patterns

- Harder to socialise and meet new people.
- Not being able to have fun with friends when they've been drinking.

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## Why do you drink?

If you have decided you want to change your drinking patterns you might find it helpful to work out exactly how much you are drinking and why. Keeping a diary for a couple of weeks will help you see how you drink and identify any patterns or risky situations. For example:

- Did you drink more when you were in particular places, doing certain things or just being with certain people? For example, at the sports club, watching TV with friends, at a party or at lunch on pay-day?
- How were you feeling? Were you angry, happy, bored or depressed? Certain moods in different people can increase their urge to drink.
- Did your drinking get you into trouble with your family, friends or the police? What led up to that situation?

Think how you can change your routine so there is less risk of these situations occurring or how you can handle them differently. Your support person might have some good ideas.

## What do you want to achieve?

After listing the advantages and disadvantages of changing your drinking pattern and keeping a diary you will have a better understanding of how much you drink, why you drink and what impact it is having on your life and the lives of those around you.

The first decision to make is to decide how you want to change your drinking patterns. Do you want to cut back, gradually reduce the amount until you have quit, or quit drinking immediately?

### Some things to consider when making this choice include:

- Your health: if you have been drinking heavily for a long period of time, if your health has been suffering, or if your doctor recommends it, it may be best if you quit drinking completely.
- How much and how you drink: do you find it difficult to stop drinking after just one or two drinks?
- Have you tried to cut down or quit before?
- Have you experienced severe withdrawal symptoms previously?

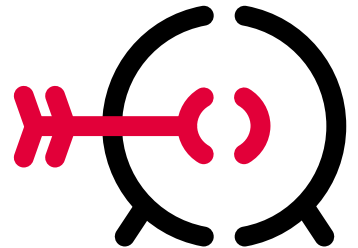
The next step is to set some short and long-term goals. These goals need to be realistic and will depend on your overall aim.

You might not be able to change everything at once so think about what you could do in the short-term (over the next week) that will get you closer to your long-term goals. It is important to set realistic goals. If you set goals that are too high and don't reach them you may feel disappointed and feel like giving up.

For example, if your overall goal is to reduce your drinking some short-term goals for the week might include:

- Not having a drink when watching TV during the week.
- Setting a minimum number of alcohol-free days you will have.
- Setting a maximum number of standard drinks you will have per day.

Write down your goals and the dates by which you wish to achieve them. There is space for this in the diary at the beginning of each week. You should review your goals regularly. If you reach your goals, you can set new ones. If you don't reach them, have a look at what went wrong and try again. You might find it helpful to discuss your goals and whether you achieved them with a support person or health professional.



## Make sure you have support

It is important that you have people available to you that can help and support you. This could be your general practitioner, a counsellor, a friend, a support group, or a combination of any of these.

### Medical practitioner

Your medical practitioner can provide support and assistance at all stages of changing your drinking patterns. They can monitor your health and help you cope with any withdrawal you may be experiencing. They can also discuss the various treatment options, services and medications that may be suitable for you and provide referrals to other services and counsellors.

### Counsellors

Counsellors can also provide support and help you develop strategies to change your behaviour. They can also discuss the various treatment options and services that may be suitable for you. There are a number of different types of counselling services and methods available. Some provide individual counselling while others offer group counselling.

There is also telephone and online counselling available.

### Support groups

Support groups such as Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) are generally run by people who have been affected by alcohol dependency issues, so the members can understand what you are experiencing. They aim to help members remain alcohol free and also provide social networks that do not involve alcohol.

### Friends and family

You could ask a friend or family member to be your support person. The important thing is that they need to be someone you trust and who understands the type of life you lead. If you choose to have a support person, it is important that they also read this guide and the "Guidelines for support people" at the back of this booklet.

For further information, counselling, referral or other assistance, contact the alcohol and drug services in your state or territory (see the back of this booklet for details).

## Coping with withdrawal

If a person who has been drinking heavily over time suddenly stops drinking or reduces their alcohol consumption they may experience withdrawal symptoms as their body adjusts to functioning without alcohol.

Generally these symptoms peak after a couple of days and gradually settle down over the next week or two. While some of the symptoms are mild, others can be severe. People considering alcohol withdrawal should consult a health professional.

Some of the symptoms of alcohol withdrawal could include:

- loss of appetite
- nausea
- anxiety
- insomnia
- irritability
- confusion
- tremors
- sweating
- and in severe cases, convulsions, cramps, vomiting, seizures, delusions, hallucinations and even death.

## Strategies for changing your drinking patterns

Planning what kind of strategies you will use to change your drinking pattern and how you will cope with risky situations will help you deal with these situations when they occur.

The following section provides hints and tips on:

- cutting down
- saying no
- coping with the urge to drink and relapse.

### Hints on cutting down

If your goal is to reduce your alcohol consumption there are a number of strategies that you can use. These include:

- Sip your drinks, don't gulp them down. If you are thirsty have a soft drink or water first.
- Try to avoid drinking in rounds as people generally drink to keep up with the fastest drinker. If you are in a round, drink a lower alcohol drink or skip a drink occasionally. Go easy on the salty chips and nuts as these can make you drink more.
- Do something so that you are not just concentrating on drinking. Play pool or darts, dance or talk to friends.
- Drink low and non-alcoholic drinks alternatives.
- Try having a 'spacer', a non-alcoholic drink every second or third drink.
- When mixing your own drinks, use more mixer and less alcohol than usual.
- Don't let people top up your drink. Always finish your drink before getting another one.
- Try to use standard drinks measures wherever possible, especially when drinking at home. This will make it easier to keep track of how much alcohol you are drinking.

### Tips on saying no

Whether your goal is to reduce your alcohol consumption or quit drinking you will need to think about how you will respond when someone offers you a drink. By thinking about how you will respond before you are in that situation you can be prepared.

Your responses might include:

- No thanks, I'm cutting down.
- No thanks, I've given up.
- No thanks, I've had enough.
- No thanks, I'll sit this one out.
- No thanks, I have to get up early in the morning.
- No thanks, but what will you have?
- Thanks, what non-alcoholic drinks are on offer?
- No thanks, I promised I wouldn't drink too much.
- No thanks, I've discovered what causes hangovers.

It does get easier with practice. Choose a couple of these, or make up your own, and rehearse saying them by yourself so you sound confident and at ease.

Some people just won't accept no for an answer. You may have to avoid being around them.

Remember your friends may only be putting pressure on you to drink as a way of making themselves feel more comfortable about their own drinking.

### Coping with the urge to drink and relapse

You have given yourself the best chance of succeeding by taking time to think about your drinking and how you are going to change things. Even so, saying you are going to do something can often be easier than actually doing it. There may be times when you find it hard to stick to your goals or you just feel like giving up. The first thing to do is to think about why you started all this in the first place:

- If you made a list of advantages and disadvantages of changing your drinking patterns, take the list out and read it again.
- Talk to your support person, that's what they're there for.
- Go for a walk or do some other physical or distracting activity to take your mind off the urge.
- Try having a non-alcoholic drink.
- Delay having a drink for 15 minutes, the urge may pass.
- If you are in a "risky situation/environment", leave it.
- Try using relaxation techniques.

If you do slip up and don't stick to your goals—don't despair. It's only one day out of your whole life. Definitely don't throw it all away. Think about why it happened and see if you can avoid that sort of situation again or how you would cope differently next time. Ask your support person or health professional for help and advice.

Fill in the diary every day and make sure you note how you were feeling and how you coped.



## Changing your drinking patterns

Now that you have decided what you want to achieve, set some goals and identified some strategies to help cope with risky situations you are ready to change your drinking patterns.

This diary will help give you a record of what, when and why you are drinking. You can compare your progress with previous weeks and keep track of your goals.

Make sure you:

- Fill in days when you have had nothing to drink.
- Note the times when the urge to drink was strong but you didn't drink.
- Note down how you coped with difficult situations.

If you are reducing your drinking make sure you also:

- Enter all the alcoholic drinks you have.
- Work out how many standard drinks you've had each day.
- Add up the money you have spent on alcohol, including "rounds" with friends.

Once you have started to change your drinking habits, continue to keep your diary. Review your diary once a week, perhaps with your support person. Think about what happened when the urge to drink was strong. How did you cope? What were you feeling when you drank more than you planned? How could you deal with that situation differently next time?

Once you have settled into a drinking pattern you are happy with, keep the diary for a week every few months to check that you haven't slipped.

## Sample diary entries

Day	What time, where and with whom	Feelings before urge to drink/drinking	Feelings and what happened after/ instead of drinking	Amount and types of drinks	Money spent	Standard drinks
Mon	8pm In club, after training, with John & Anne	Felt relaxed, didn't feel like drinking	Went to club	4 Pots of beer	\$22.00	5
Tue	6pm At home alone	Bad day at work, felt stressed & needed to unwind	Feeling down, went to pub	3 glasses of wine	\$21.00	4.5
Wed	7pm At home with family	Tired & stressed about work	Went for a walk to distract myself	0	0	0
Thur			Watched TV	0	0	0
Fri	5.30pm At the pub with workmates	Relaxed	Drank soft drink instead of beer	0	0	0
Sat		Felt relaxed, didn't feel like drinking	Watched TV	0	0	0
Sun	2pm BBQ at Jen and Pete's	Relaxed	Argued with John, felt guilty about drinking	1 bottle of wine	\$15.00	7.5

Goals: Week ending:

Day	What time, where and with whom	Feelings before urge to drink/drinking	Feelings and what happened after/instead of drinking	Amount and types of drinks	Money spent	Standard drinks
Mon						
Tue						
Wed						
Thur						
Fri						
Sat						
Sun						
Weekly Total						

↓ Download additional pages for the diary

## Guidelines for supporters

Being asked to be someone's support person is a great compliment. Your friend must look on you as someone they can trust and whose advice they respect.

There are a number of ways you can help your friend change their drinking behaviour.

- Read this booklet and then go through it with your friend.
- Discuss the areas where you can help.
- Be clear about when and where they can contact you if they are having trouble sticking to their goals. For example, can they ring you at work?
- You might want to arrange a regular time to get together to go over their progress and discuss how they are doing.
- Have rules about how involved you will be. Remember you are only there to help, actually changing drinking behaviour is their responsibility.

- Be constructive about their progress, congratulate them when things go well and avoid criticising when things go badly. Work with them to think of new ways to tackle the difficult times.
- If they slip up, help them not to feel as if they have failed. Look on it as a temporary setback and encourage them to keep going.
- Celebrate with them when they achieve their goals, this can be something simple like going for a meal, to the cinema or shopping.
- There are support groups, telephone help lines and services to support people who have a friend or family member with an alcohol dependency problem. Contact details for two services are listed below.

**Family Drug Help: 1300 660 068**  
**Family Drug Support: 1300 368 186**

For further information, counselling or other assistance, contact the alcohol and drug information service in your state or territory.

**ACT** (02) 5124 9977

**NSW** (02) 9361 8000

1800 422 599 (outside Sydney)

**NT** 1800 131 350

**QLD** 1800 177 833

**SA** 1300 131 340

**TAS** 1800 250 015

**VIC** 1300 85 85 84 (information)

1800 888 236 (counselling)

**WA** (08) 9442 5000

1800 198 024 (outside Perth)

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