

# Alcohol – the risks and benefits to your health

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Introducing new Alcohol Guidelines

What is a 'Standard Drink'?

How to estimate a 'Standard Drink'

Alcohol – the risks and benefits to your health

The Guidelines for drinkers:

1. To lessen the risks to your health and gain any longer–term benefits
2. If you undertake activities that involve risk or a degree of skill
3. If you are responsible for private or public drinking settings

The Guidelines for specific groups:

4. If you have a health or social problem related to, or made worse by, alcohol (including alcohol dependence)
5. If you have a relative who has, or has had, a problem with alcohol
6. If you have a mental health problem (including anxiety or depression and/or problems sleeping)
7. If you take medications or other drugs
8. If you are an older person
9. If you are a young adult (aged about 18–25 years)
10. If you are a young person (up to about 18 years)
11. If you are pregnant, or are planning to become pregnant
12. For people who choose not to drink alcohol

Alcohol and your health

Alcohol is widely used and enjoyed by Humans, and can form part of an enjoyable and healthy lifestyle that includes good diet and exercise.

However, drinking in excess of low–risk levels can have harmful effects on your health. In the short term, negative effects may include:

- how you think and behave;
- your stress levels, sleep patterns and sexual function;
- your gut and pancreas; and
- your heart and circulatory system; and may lead to:
  - risky behaviour, injury or death.

Long term effects on your health may include:

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- cancer;
- cirrhosis of the liver;
- brain damage and memory loss; and
- alcohol dependence.

### Why new Guidelines?

Since then there have been many developments in our knowledge. The current Alcohol Guidelines, which were endorsed by Medical Research are summarised in this booklet.

They can help you to make informed choices about your drinking and health.

### Alcohol Guidelines

The new Guidelines can help you think about your patterns of drinking and how much you drink.

'Patterns of drinking' means:

- when and where you drink;
- the number of times you drink heavily;
- the activities associated with your drinking;
- your personal characteristics and those of your drinking companions;
- the types of drinks you consume; and
- the drinking expectations and behaviours that make up your 'drinking culture'.

The Guidelines also provide information on the beneficial effects of alcohol, such as the protection alcohol may provide against heart disease in middle-aged or older people.

The Guidelines use the idea of a 'standard drink'. A standard drink is any drink that contains 10 grams of alcohol.

It can sometimes be difficult to work out standard drinks because:

- different types of alcoholic drinks contain different proportions of alcohol per volume; and
- different glass sizes are used in different drinking settings.

It can also be difficult for you to keep track of how much alcohol you consume in situations where:

- large containers (jugs, casks, flagons) are being shared;
- glasses are being topped up; and
- drinks are mixed with unknown amounts of alcohol, such as cocktails or alcoholic punch.

It is, however, possible for you to make some estimates:

- the label on any bottle, can or cask states how many standard drinks are inside the container; and
- you can use a standard drinks conversion guide, such as the one provided at the back of this booklet.

### Levels of risk

The Guidelines describe three levels of risk:

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- Low risk – a level of drinking at which you have little risk of harm and, for older people, the possibility of health benefits
- Risky – levels at which your risk of harm is significantly increased, beyond any possible benefits
- High risk – levels at which your risk of serious harm is substantial

The question of body size and type:

The Guidelines refer to people of average or above average weight. If you are below average body size, the levels recommended in these Guidelines may be too high for you and you should drink less than recommended.

There are different Guidelines for men and for women.

This is because women are more susceptible to the effects of alcohol than men.

Looking at the risks to your health:

The Guidelines also explain short and long-term risks to your health from drinking alcohol at risky or high risk levels. Short-term risk means the risk of harm that is associated with each separate drinking occasion. This includes the risk of injury, interpersonal violence and accidental death, as well as broader health effects such as stress levels, sleep disorders, reduced circulation and sexual dysfunction.

Long-term health risks mean the likelihood of harm that is associated with regular daily and weekly patterns of drinking. The main long-term consequences to your health may be:

- cancer, especially of the mouth, throat and oesophagus;
- cirrhosis of the liver;
- brain damage and memory loss;
- alcohol dependence;
- complex interactions with regard to cardiovascular disease, which may include some health benefits from low-risk levels of drinking for heart disease, if you are over 40 years old; and
- possible increased risk of peripheral neuropathy, cardiomyopathy, and sexual problems (especially male impotency).

Considering the benefits to your health:

The guidelines also point to some benefits of regularly drinking very small amounts of alcohol for middle-aged and older people. These benefits include reducing the risk of heart disease, and to a lesser extent gallstones and diabetes. Similar benefits can also be gained through a healthy diet for all these disorders, and through regular exercise, and giving up smoking in the case of heart disease. People who choose not to drink alcohol should not be urged to drink to gain any potential health benefit.

Guideline 1

For men:

- No more than 4 standard drinks a day on average. And no more than 6 standard drinks on any one day.\* One or two alcohol-free days per

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week.

For women:

· No more than 2 standard drinks a day on average. And no more than 4 standard drinks on any one day.\* One or two alcohol-free days per week.

\* These drinks should be spread over several hours. For example, men should have no more than 2 standard drinks in the first hour and 1 per hour after that. Women should have no more than 1 standard drink per hour.

NB: Guideline 1 assumes that you:

- Are not about to undertake any activity involving risk or a degree of skill, including driving, flying, water sports, skiing, using complex or heavy machinery or farm machinery etc;
- Do not have a condition that is made worse by drinking, or a family history of alcohol-related problems;
- Are not on medication;
- Are not pregnant; and
- Are 18 years or older.
- If you drink within the average drinking levels in Guideline 1:
  - you will minimise the longer term risk of ill health and death related to alcohol; and
  - you will maximise the potential longer term benefits to your health.
- The limits set for drinking on any one occasion are intended to reduce your short-term risk from intoxication.
- The limits set for drinking on any one occasion also contribute to reducing your long-term risk of harm.
- If you drink above the daily limits set out in Guideline 1, you will significantly increase your short-term risk of social and health problems, including injury or death from accident, assault and self-harm.
- The safety of drinking depends not only on how much you drink, but also on:
  - the rate at which you drink;
  - where you drink; and
  - what you are doing during and after drinking (for example eating while drinking helps to reduce intoxication).
- The risk of injury, violence, depression and suicide attempt are all influenced by the setting in which you are drinking.
- The same amount of alcohol usually affects women more than men, because of the way women's bodies process alcohol.

Alcohol-free days: Reducing the risks to your health:

Regular alcohol-free days may help you to remain in control of your drinking and reduce the likelihood of it becoming a habit. This is especially important if you drink above the Guideline limits. There is evidence to show that if you drink (even at low levels) over time you will acquire some tolerance to alcohol, but this will occur less if you only drink occasionally.

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A mild degree of alcohol dependence is common in population. One early sign of this may be, for example, that you find it difficult to drink within the recommended guidelines.

### Guideline 2

· to avoid risk of harm to yourself and others, do not drink alcohol before or during such activities. Even very small amounts of alcohol can affect your judgement and performance. A very small effect may be important where a high degree of skill is needed, or if the risk is already high or the safety of others is involved. Situations where this Guideline is important include recreational and occupational activities such as flying, water sports, skiing, using complex or heavy machinery or farm machinery, and driving.

Blood alcohol levels are set by legislation and/or company policy in occupational settings such as flying commercial aircraft (eg no alcohol within 24 hours of flying), driving public or heavy vehicles, or operating commercial vessels, machinery or mobile plant.

Although State and Territory laws allow you to have a Blood Alcohol Concentration (BAC) of up to 0.05 when driving (if you hold a full driving licence), your judgement and performance may be affected at blood alcohol levels lower than this. Research shows that when your blood alcohol level is 0.05, your risk of crashing is twice as high as if you hadn't been drinking at all. In most States learner (L–plate) and provisional (P–plate) drivers of all ages must have a blood alcohol level of zero or under 0.02.

If you are a learner driver or hold a provisional licence, you should allow several hours after drinking before you drive in order to stay under 0.02 BAC.

The more alcohol you consume, the longer it takes for your BAC to return to zero. It generally takes about one hour for one standard drink to pass through your bloodstream, and after a heavy drinking session, your BAC may still be over 0.05 the next morning. Furthermore, even after your BAC returns to normal, your judgement and performance may continue to be impaired from the effects of a hangover. Your BAC should remain below 0.05 if you:

- drink no more than two standard drinks in the first hour and one per hour thereafter (for men of average size); or
- drink no more than one standard drink per hour (for women of average size). However it can vary significantly from person to person.

### Guideline 3

- actively promote responsible drinking;
- try to make sure that people being served alcohol do not become intoxicated;
- suggest alternative drinks to alcohol;
- refuse to serve alcohol to people who are intoxicated;

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- closely supervise or monitor young people; and
- look for ways to reduce possible causes of harm in the setting.

There is good evidence that both licensed and private drinking settings can either increase or decrease the risk of short-term harm associated with drinking. This Guideline applies to any setting where alcohol is served, including:

- private homes and parties, workplaces (for social functions); and
- any public setting (hotels and bars, clubs, public events, planes etc).

Effective ways you can help to reduce health risks include:

- provide non-alcoholic and low alcohol drinks;
- encourage people to alternate alcoholic and non-alcoholic drinks;
- make food available;
- provide safe transport; and
- staff training.

Some of these are legal requirements in licensed premises under State and Territory laws.

Drinking Settings:

Guideline 4

- you should consider not drinking at all;
- you are strongly advised to stop drinking for at least several weeks or months;
- you might then try drinking at low levels\* (substantially below Guideline 1) under the supervision of your doctor;
- you should not drink at all if you have developed severe alcohol dependence;
- you should never drink if you have a severe health problem made worse by alcohol (eg cirrhosis of the liver, pancreatitis); and
- if you have hepatitis C, or another form of chronic viral hepatitis, you should consider drinking only infrequently and well below the levels recommended in Guideline 1. A range of health and social problems may be associated with alcohol misuse. These include domestic violence, unsafe sex, financial and relationship problems, and physical conditions such as pancreatitis, high blood pressure and gastrointestinal problems. These problems may or may not involve dependence.

People experience the symptoms of alcohol dependence in different ways. You may have withdrawal symptoms, both physical and psychological (eg anxiety, tremors) when you stop drinking. You may have difficulty in limiting drinking on any one occasion. For some people, especially those with severe dependence, total abstinence will be the only realistic goal.

For some people with a drinking problem 'controlled drinking' is feasible, especially if they have social supports and if they tackle the problem early, before they become too severely dependent.

If you already have significant alcohol dependence or major organ

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damage (eg damage to liver or pancreas), you will incur further harm if you continue to drink.

\*The appropriate level will vary from person to person:

There are a number of professional, medical and voluntary agencies that can help you if you have problems with your drinking. Most States and Territories have an alcohol and drug telephone helpline, which can provide information on specialist services available [a list is provided on page 18].

Families offer a key resource in helping people with drinking problems, and are often the first to identify such problems. It is crucial that the impact of such problems on families and partners be recognised, and their needs supported.

### Guideline 5

- you should be careful about how much you drink;
- you should take particular care to have regular alcohol-free days (one or two days per week); and
- you might consider not drinking at all.

If you have a family history of alcohol-related problems, including alcohol dependence, you are more at risk than the general population of being unable to control your level of drinking.

The degree of risk is related to:

- the closeness of the relative who has the alcohol-related problem (first or second degree relatives); and/or
- the number of relatives involved.

Alcohol-free days are particularly important, because they help you to avoid alcohol-related problems by breaking your drinking pattern.

\*First-degree relatives (parents, siblings) or second-degree relatives (grandparents, uncles, aunts and cousins).

### Guideline 6

- if you choose to drink, you should take particular care to stay within the levels set out in Guideline 1, and you should consult your doctor or pharmacist about possible side-effects;
- you may need to consider not drinking at all, if you find it difficult to keep your drinking within these Guideline levels; and
- you may need to stop drinking entirely if symptoms persist.

Research has shown that drinking above the levels set in Guideline 1, and particularly at high risk levels, leads to poorer outcomes for people with a mental health problem.

In particular, if you are depressed and sometimes drink excessively, you are at much greater risk of self-harm and suicide, especially if you also regularly drink above Guideline levels.

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Heavy drinking can also aggravate symptoms in people with depression and anxiety. While alcohol consumption may bring you some relief from anxiety and stress in the short term, it can also worsen your mood in the long term, especially at higher levels of consumption.

There is also some evidence to show that people with schizophrenia have poorer outcomes if they use alcohol.

With some mental health problems, the risk of alcohol dependence is significantly increased, particularly if you drink to relieve anxiety or change your mood.

Most of the medications used for mental health problems interact with alcohol. If you have a mental health problem, you should discuss your alcohol intake with your doctor.

If you are the carer of a person with a mental health problem, you can encourage that person to stay within Guideline levels, or to abstain if necessary.

Alcohol can also disrupt your sleep. Even one or two drinks may reduce the quality of your sleep and cause early morning waking.

### Guideline 7

- you should carefully read the labels and pamphlets with your medications (including herbal preparations) to check for harmful interactions with alcohol. You may need to reduce your drinking or stop drinking alcohol altogether;
- you are advised to be very cautious if you drink alcohol while using benzodiazepines, heroin, methadone or other central nervous system depressants;
- if you take a number of medications, you are at greater risk of increasing the effects of alcohol and/or decreasing the effectiveness of your medication – you may need to reduce your drinking or stop drinking alcohol completely; and
- you should consult your doctor or a pharmacist to discuss any possible interaction of your medication with alcohol.

Alcohol can interact with many prescribed and over-the counter medications. This can alter the effects of alcohol and/or the medication. Some herbal preparations also interact with alcohol.

Even at low levels, drinking can cause problems due to interactions with some medications. Response varies from person to person. Such interactions can have serious implications if you are driving or operating machinery.

Alcohol dampens activity in the brain, and it can be particularly dangerous, or even lethal, when used with medications or other drugs, legal or illegal, that have similar effects (that is, that they

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depress the central nervous system).

For more information on medications that may interact with alcohol, talk to your doctor or pharmacist.

### Guideline 8

- you are advised, if you drink, to consider drinking less than the levels set in Guideline 1.

Everyone ages at a different rate, and as you age you will need to reassess your drinking regularly.

While alcohol has psychological, social and health benefits for many older people, the body's ability to process alcohol decreases with age.

You may need to reduce your drinking or stop drinking completely to avoid harmful interactions with medications.

With age you are more susceptible to the effects of alcohol because:

- you are at increased risk of falls;
- your driving may be affected;
- any medications you take may have a harmful effect when combined with alcohol; and
- as you continue to age the total water content of your body decreases, so that a given amount of alcohol tends to produce a higher blood alcohol level.

Regarding the prevention of heart disease:

- you can achieve the potential benefits of alcohol with as little as one to two standard drinks per day for men, and less than one per day for women; but
- you can gain similar benefits from other strategies, such as regular exercise, giving up smoking and a healthy diet.

### Guideline 9

- you are especially urged not to drink beyond the levels set in Guideline 1;
- you should not drink at all for at least several hours before you undertake potentially risky activities (for example, driving, swimming and boating); and
- you should not mix alcohol with other mood altering drugs.

Many young adults drink at low risk levels. However if you are a young adult, you are in the age group that is most likely to experience alcohol-related harm, according to statistics. Young adults have the highest alcohol consumption and are the age group at highest risk of alcohol-related injury including road trauma, violence, sexual coercion, falls, accidental death (including drowning), and suicide. Younger, less experienced drinkers are at even higher risk due to their lower alcohol tolerance.

If you are a learner driver or a provisional licence holder, you must avoid alcohol in the hours before driving, to meet legal requirements in all States and Territories. You need to weigh up the expected benefits of drinking alcohol against increased risk taking, loss of inhibitions, reduced decision making skills, overdose related to a low tolerance to alcohol and the increased risk of accidents, violence and unwanted sexual activity.

Ways you can lessen the risk of harm from drinking include:

- alternating alcoholic and non-alcoholic drinks;
- choosing low alcohol drinks;
- eating while drinking;
- staying with friends rather than driving; and
- not accepting lifts with a drunk driver.

The effect of alcohol in protecting against heart disease has shown to be relevant only for people over about 40 years. There is no evidence to suggest that it is relevant for younger age groups.

\*While this Guideline applies to everyone, it is particularly important if you are aged about 18–25 years. The issues and concerns also overlap with those covered under Guideline 10 for young people (up to about 18 years).

### Guideline 10

You should follow the recommendations under Guideline 9 and:

- if you choose not to drink, others should support your decision;
- in settings where alcohol is available to you, you should be under adult supervision at all times;
- you should keep your drinking to a minimum;
- most importantly, you should not drink to become intoxicated; and
- to become a responsible adult drinker, a gradual, supervised introduction to alcohol is recommended.

A younger person's ability to cope with alcohol is influenced by their physical size and stage of development. Young people generally have a smaller body size than adults, and therefore tolerate less alcohol. They also lack experience of alcohol and its effects. This lack of experience also means that their bodies have not developed any tolerance to alcohol.

There is research from the United States to show that the earlier a young person starts to drink, the greater the risk of alcohol-related problems later in life.

Drinking by young people is very common, although there are also many young people who do not drink. Opinions vary about the best age to start drinking. Some cultures introduce children to very diluted alcoholic drinks at a young age.

Loss of inhibitions and decision-making skills place young people at

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particular risk of violence, accidents and sexual coercion.

Helping young people to learn about drinking and the effects of alcohol within a safe and supportive environment can help them to manage their drinking in ways that minimise the risk to themselves and to others, both when they are young and throughout their adult years.

This Guideline should be interpreted within the context of the relevant State/Territory laws in relation to alcohol and young people.

### Guideline 11

- you should consider not drinking at all;
- most importantly, you should never become intoxicated;
- if you choose to drink, you should have less than 7 standard drinks over a week, AND no more than 2 standard drinks (spread over at least two hours) on any one day; and
- you should note that the risk is highest in the earlier stages of pregnancy, including the time from conception to the first missed period.

Alcohol in a woman's blood stream passes to her unborn child, and this may affect the child from conception onwards. It is difficult to identify the exact levels of drinking which may cause harm to the child, and for this reason, you may consider not drinking at all.

The limited evidence available indicates that if you average less than one drink per day, there will be no measurable impact on the physical and mental development of your child. The evidence indicates that episodes of drinking above the Guideline levels considerably increase the risk to your unborn child, including the risk of miscarriage, low birth weight, cognitive defects and congenital abnormalities. Heavy bouts of drinking increase that risk.

The most important consideration is for you to avoid a high blood alcohol level at any time during your pregnancy. The first weeks after conception are probably the most critical in relation to alcohol and you may not be aware of the pregnancy at this stage.

This Guideline is therefore important not only for women who are pregnant, but also for those who are planning to become pregnant.

Good antenatal care and good diet, including folate and vitamin B supplements, and not smoking are all also very important.

Alcohol and Pregnancy: No blame No shame! is the sequel to Alcohol and Pregnancy: A Mother's Responsible Disturbance!

It explores how prenatal alcohol exposure has affected the lives. Stories include those of a mother challenged by symptoms consistent with FASD whose baby, now a teenager, was pre-natally exposed to alcohol, and the exasperation of a young woman with pFAS trying to

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live her life consistent with her family's values but repeatedly falling short of her goal.

These stories highlight how they coped, their strategies, mistakes, pain and heartache and their triumphs and tragedies and how difficult it is to get appropriate professional help for this disorder.

Professor Fiona Stanley in her foreword to this book says:

"Ask most pregnant mothers what it is that they wish most for their unborn child, and most will answer quite simply that their greatest wish is for their child to be healthy. Their greatest fear is that their child will be abnormal.

Yet when it comes to telling women that drinking alcohol in pregnancy is dangerous for their child and can cause lifelong harm, many health professionals skirt around the issue and give mixed messages. Rather than advocating abstinence, they offer false reassurance that a few drinks could be okay.

The truth is that there is NO safe level of alcohol consumption in pregnancy. Society would frown upon a mother who put alcohol in a newborn's bottle, but accepts a pregnant woman having a 'social' drink. Women have a right to know the real harm that drinking alcohol – even in small amounts – can do to their developing child. Armed with knowledge, they can make good choices. Fetal Alcohol Syndrome is an entirely preventable disability – IF we have the courage to confront it."

Focus shifts back to pregnancy drinking

Even a glass of wine a day is too much, expert warns

Picture this: a child has started school and is struggling to learn to read. As part of the long list of questions the school and developmental experts might start to pose to the parents comes the question, how much did the mother drink while pregnant?

Such an up-front question was an important part of starting to gauge the impact social drinking during pregnancy, in mothers ill-informed they are acting responsibly, was having on the State's children, said obstetrician Dale Hamilton, of the King Edward Memorial Hospitals' Chemical Dependency Clinic.

Binge and excessive drinking could cause an obvious syndrome at birth, with reduced-sized brain and facial abnormalities, but smaller amounts of alcohol could lead to intellectual, behavioural and impulse problems and contribute to ADHD, which were not often detected until the child entered the classroom. Dr Hamilton warned a glass of wine a day was too much during pregnancy. It was well above the National Health and Medical Research Council recommendation of no more than a standard drink of 100ml, on no more than five days a week.

But questions were now being raised about the safety of even small

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amounts of alcohol and her advice was to not drink at all while pregnant.

She urged GPs and other health professionals to get in early and question the drinking habits of pregnant women or those trying to conceive. She acknowledged it was easier for medical and health staff to ignore this topic because Australia had such a pro-drinking culture and there was a reluctance to make mothers feel guilty – but it was vital the issue was addressed.

Some 58 per cent of WA women drink while pregnant and an estimated 57 per cent of the health problems alcohol caused in their babies were not detected at birth, said clinic co-coordinator Claire Henderson.

The first few months of pregnancy were a particular concern. A study of 4839 mothers by the Telethon Institute for Child Health Research found 14.2 per cent of women drank five or more standard drinks a day in the three months up to conception, so many exposed their babies to high levels of alcohol before knowing they were pregnant.

The Chemical Dependency Clinic is available for any pregnant woman who has concerns about her alcohol or drug consumption and is seeking medical help and advice. Call 9340 2222 and ask for the clinic.

**Breastfeeding: A prudent approach!**

If you are breastfeeding, you are advised not to exceed the levels of drinking recommended during pregnancy, and you may consider not drinking at all.

Alcohol in your blood stream passes into the breast milk. There is little research evidence available about the effect of alcohol in breast milk on your baby. However, practitioners report that, even at relatively low levels of drinking, it may reduce the supply of milk and cause irritability, poor feeding and sleep disturbance in the infant.

### Guideline 12

- you should be supported in your decision not to drink and not feel pressured to drink for potential health benefits.

There are many good health, family and social reasons why you may choose not to drink. These include personal, cultural and religious considerations.

The potential protection that alcohol may provide against heart disease, and to a lesser extent gallstones or diabetes, is of importance only for people aged from about 40 onwards when these diseases are more common.

If you choose not to drink, a healthy diet, regular exercise and giving up smoking will provide similar health benefits.

Talk to your GP or health care professional or you can call alcohol and drug information services in your State/Territory:

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Addiction is the paralysis of choice, lack of clarity of choice, lack of will power to pursue flourishing choices, a disease of the will drives.

Addiction is a disease with clinical features, genetics, natural history, response to treatment and biological markers.

(Alcoholism, Narcotic & Drug Addiction Intervention Resources).

- Dedicated to improving recovery from Addiction by conducting Clinical Research, Collaborating & Communicating Scientific findings.
- Address the Complexities of Addiction & Recovery across the continuum of care.
- Individual & Group Counselling, Multicultural Counselling, Mental Health Complications & Adolescent Development.

Last, but not the least; Recovery from Addiction is possible, there is Hope & there is a Life beyond the Pain.

More Information & Queries!

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For more information about the Australian Alcohol Guidelines (Health Risks and Benefits):

[www.alcoholguidelines.gov.au](http://www.alcoholguidelines.gov.au)

For more information

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## Alcohol – the risks and benefits to your health

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For people who choose not to drink alcohol

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Northern Territory

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Metro: (07) 3236 2414

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South Australia

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Tasmania

1800 811 994

Victoria

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Western Australia

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Australian Alcohol Guidelines

For more information about the Australian Alcohol Guidelines (Health  
Risks and Benefits):

[www.alcoholguidelines.gov.au](http://www.alcoholguidelines.gov.au)

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