The facts about binge drinking

Introduction
Alcohol is the most widely used recreational drug in Australia. Because it is so widely used and socially acceptable in our society, alcohol is often not considered to be a ‘drug’, nor is it considered to be particularly harmful. However, evidence from research shows that consumption of alcohol at harmful levels is increasing in Australia, particularly among young people. Furthermore, the prevalence of alcohol use among young people has increased in the past decade, the average age of first use being 14.1 Much of this drinking takes the form of ‘binge drinking’.

This fact sheet explains the risks and harms associated with binge drinking, and offers suggestions for avoiding these harms.

What is binge drinking?
Binge drinking is a term widely used, but people tend to have quite different understandings of exactly what that means. Most definitions of binge drinking refer to the act of drinking heavily over a short period of time or drinking continuously over a number of days or weeks. Some common definitions of binge drinking/a binge drinker are:

▪ drinking to get drunk—a ‘bender’
▪ occasional bouts of heavy drinking by young and/or non-dependent people
▪ intermittent, or irregular, episodes of excessive drinking
▪ ‘a person who is normally restrained in their drinking habits but who at frequent intervals over-indulges to a marked degree’2.

In this fact sheet, we use the term ‘binge drinking’ to refer to drinking, on any single occasion, significantly more than the low-risk levels advised by the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC, see page 3).3

Is binge drinking harmful?
Binge drinking can be harmful for a number of reasons:

▪ It can be immediately and directly harmful to your health.
▪ It can expose you and others to risk of injury, or even death (short-term harms).
▪ The consequences of these can have long-lasting effects on both your health and well-being (long-term harms).

People who should take particular care with alcohol include those who:

▪ have certain health conditions that are made worse by drinking (such as chronic hepatitis C and cirrhosis of the liver)
▪ are taking certain medications (such as Valium or Serepax) or who use other drugs (such as heroin or methadone)
▪ have a family history of alcohol-related problems
▪ women who are pregnant
▪ anyone who is about to undertake activity involving physical risk or a degree of skill, such as driving, flying, water sports or using complex, heavy or farm machinery
▪ anyone under the age of 18.
Short-term effects
Binge drinking can result in acute intoxication (drunkenness). It can lead people to put themselves in dangerous situations and to take risks with their health and well-being. Common short-term effects of binge-drinking episodes are hangovers, headaches, nausea, shakiness and possible vomiting and memory loss.

The short-term risks of binge drinking include the risks of harm such as falls, assaults and car accidents. Young people often are not aware of the dangers associated with acute intoxication, and are more likely to indulge in risky behaviour while intoxicated, such as swimming, driving, unsafe or unwanted sex, verbal or physical abuse.

Long-term effects
If someone drinks heavily over a long period of time, they can become physically and psychologically dependent upon alcohol. Their body gets used to functioning with alcohol present and/or drinking can become more important than other activities in their life. Over time, alcohol can damage parts of the body, including the brain and liver. There are also the risks of developing emotional problems, such as depression, and problems at school, work and with relationships.

Other effects of binge drinking include unwanted pregnancy, feeling bad about yourself afterwards (such as shame or embarrassment), feeling vulnerable and out of control while intoxicated, losing friends or loved ones as a result of your behaviour, loss of valuable items such as a car after a smash or personal items such as jewellery, or financial losses through reckless spending on alcohol or having to have time off work to recover from a binge.

How big a problem is it, really?
In 1998, alcohol use was the cause of 814 deaths and 25 207 hospital admissions of Australians aged 15–34. More than 40 per cent of people aged 16–24 surveyed in Victoria in September 2002 were drinking at levels that placed them at risk of short-term harm. Of these, 19.5 per cent of males and 13.8 per cent of females aged 18–24 were drinking at these risky levels on a weekly basis.

The prevalence of alcohol use, and binge drinking, among young people has increased in the past decade. “This generation of drinkers starts younger, drinks more and indulges in binge drinking to a greater extent than any previous generation.” Many are not aware of the harms that can be caused by binge drinking, nor are they familiar with ways to avoid the risks.

How can I avoid the risks of binge drinking?
The NHMRC has provided alcohol guidelines to help reduce alcohol-related deaths in Australia. These guidelines use standard drink measures to help people monitor and control the amount of alcohol they consume. A standard drink is defined as one that contains 10 grams of pure alcohol:

- one can (375mL) low-alcohol beer
- one pot (285mL) regular beer
- ¾ of a stubby (375mL) regular beer
- one glass of mixed drink (30mL spirits + mixer)
- one nip (30mL) of spirit or liqueur
- 100mL (small glass) table wine
- ¾ of a bottle (330mL) alcoholic soda.

It is important to remember that some venues do not serve alcohol in these standard drink sizes (they are often larger); large wine glasses can hold two or more standard drinks; drinks served at
home often contain more alcohol than one standard drink; and cocktails may contain several standard drinks.

The NHMRC guidelines indicate the risk levels for short-term harm by the number of standard drinks consumed on any one day:

For males (on any one day)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scale of risk</th>
<th>Number of drinks*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Low risk</td>
<td>up to 6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>no more than 3 days per week</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Risky</td>
<td>7–10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High risk</td>
<td>11 or more</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For females (on any one day)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scale of risk</th>
<th>Number of drinks*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Low risk</td>
<td>up to 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>no more than 3 days per week</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Risky</td>
<td>5–6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High risk</td>
<td>7 or more</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Assuming no more than 2 drinks in the first hour and one per hour thereafter for males and no more than one drink per hour for females.

These guidelines apply to adults of average or larger size, around 60 kg for males and 50 kg for females—a person of smaller than average body size should drink less. It is important to note that ‘saving up’ drinks for a few days and then having a binge is not considered low-risking drinking.

There are serious health and legal issues associated with young people under the age of 18 who drink alcohol. If you are under 18, binge drinking can be even riskier to your health and general well-being.

Some tips for controlling your drinking

It is important to know how alcohol affects you as an individual. Know your limits. If you know you will be drinking alcohol, planning is essential. Nominate a non-drinker to drive and generally to look out for those who will be drinking.

Make sure that you can call a member of your family or a friend if you need assistance.

If you are drinking:

- Set limits for yourself, and stick to them.
- Start with a non-alcoholic drink.
- Drink slowly. Take sips, not gulps.
- Remember that ‘alcopops’ (sweet-flavoured pre-mixed drinks) often mask the taste of the alcohol, but they do not mask the effects.
- Try the low-alcohol alternative.
- Eat before or while drinking, and avoid salty snacks, which make you thirsty.
- Avoid rounds or ‘shouts’.
- Have one drink at a time so you can keep track of your drinks—avoid ‘topping up’.
- Pace yourself.
- Stay busy—don’t just sit and drink.
- Have at least two alcohol-free days a week.

Be assertive—don’t be pressured into drinking more than you want or intend to.

If your alcohol use is causing concern, see your doctor or contact the alcohol and other drug service in your state or territory.

References

1 Roy Morgan Research 2002 Alcohol awareness survey, The Salvation Army
2 Macquarie Dictionary, 3rd edition, revised 2001
3 NHMRC 2001 Australian alcohol guidelines: Health risks and benefits, Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia
5 Victorian youth alcohol and drug survey, 2002, number 3, Melbourne: Premier’s Drug Prevention Council