

Information & Data Sheet **1**

Workers' Patterns of Alcohol Consumption

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Identifying the alcohol consumption patterns of the workforce is important in terms of the health and wellbeing of workers and also from the employers' perspective in terms of performance, productivity and safety issues. However, until recently relatively little was known about the drinking patterns of Australian workers. Accurate information about workers' drinking patterns is essential for the development of appropriate and effective policy and intervention strategies.

Work-related Drinking

Traditionally, work-related drinking has been conceptualised as drinking that occurs in the workplace and during actual work hours or immediately prior to commencing work. This is a very narrow conceptualisation of work-related drinking. It does not include drinking that occurs outside normal work hours that may be influenced by workplace social norms and expectations or other workplace factors.

Relatively little alcohol is consumed by Australian workers before work or during work hours, however, large proportions of the workforce engage in *work-related* drinking. Such work-related drinking might include socialising with co-workers at the end of working day. The workplace is increasingly recongised as a powerful shaper of behaviour, including drinking.

What is Risky Drinking?

Drinking per se is not necessarily problematic. It is a worker's pattern of drinking that is important. This includes where, when, how much and how often alcohol is consumed. Australia's National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) defines risky drinking in two ways. The first is in terms of harm that might be incurred in the short-term i.e., the more immediate effects, and the second is the effects of drinking over the long-term. Different patterns of consumption can contribute to short- or long-term harms as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: National Health and Medical Research Council Australian Alcohol Guidelines

Risk of short-term harm	Low risk	Risky	High risk
(Standard drinks*)			
Males (on any one day, no more than 3 days per week)	Up to 6 (on any one day)	7 to 10 (on any one day)	11 or more
Females (on any one day, no more than 3 days per week)	Up to 4 (on any one day)	5 to 6 (on any one day)	7 or more
Risk of long-term harm	Low risk	Risky (Hazardous**)	High risk (Harmful**)
(Standard drinks*)			
Males On 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 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)

* a standard drink equals 10 grams (12.5 millilitres) of alcohol

** NHMRC old (1992) terminology which only applied to long-term risk

It is also important to know how frequently someone drinks. Drinking at a risky level on a weekly basis has different consequences to doing so on a less frequent basis e.g., monthly or yearly.

Patterns of Drinking

The 2001 National Drug Strategy Household Survey (NDSHS) collected data on awareness, attitudes, and behaviour relating to alcohol, tobacco, and illicit drug use from 26,744 Australians aged 14 years or over, of whom 51% were employed. The survey found that those in the paid workforce were more likely to be drinkers than those not in the paid workforce (see Figure 1). Only 10.6% of employed respondents (9.1% male, 12.5% female) had abstained from alcohol in the past 12 months compared with 17.5% (14.1% male, 20.8% female) in the total population (Figure 1).

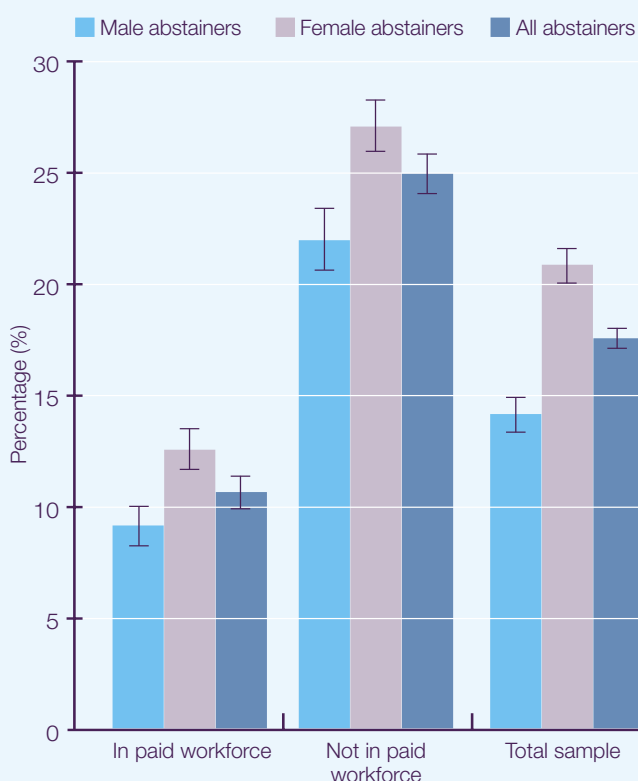


Figure 1: Proportion of abstainers aged 14 years and over, by employment status and gender, Australia 2001

What proportion of the Australian workforce drink at risky levels? (See Figures 2 & 3)

Data from the 2001 NDSHS revealed that nearly 8% (8.7% male, 6.4% female) of workers drank frequently (at least weekly) at short-term risky or high risk levels. Nearly 17% (17.9% male, 15.2% female) drank infrequently (at least monthly) at short-term risky or high risk levels, while over 18% (19.2% males, 17.0% females) drank at short-term risky or high risk levels occasionally (at least yearly). Eleven percent of workers (10.4% male, 11.7% female) drank at long-term risky or high risk levels. Over two-fifths of the workforce (43.9%) drank at short- and/or long-term risk levels.

Risky Drinking and Age

Young workers were the group most likely to engage in risky drinking. Drinking patterns associated with short- and long-term harm were most prevalent in young workers, i.e., those aged 14–29 years. There is substantial research evidence indicating that the workplace is associated with adolescents' initiation and establishment of alcohol consumption patterns. The transition phase in a young person's life, where they move away from being a child and/or student to become a member of the paid workforce is a period of great change and vulnerability. A young person's workplace environment exposes them to new social groups that are sources of influence separate from those previously experienced e.g., school/family environments. Many behavioural patterns, including drinking, are established during a young person's early years in the workforce and can be influenced by the social and cultural influences in their workplace environment. To date, little attention has been focused on the school-to-work transition and the role of the workplace in shaping young workers' alcohol consumption patterns, or on employers' duty of care to young workers in regard to work-related alcohol use.

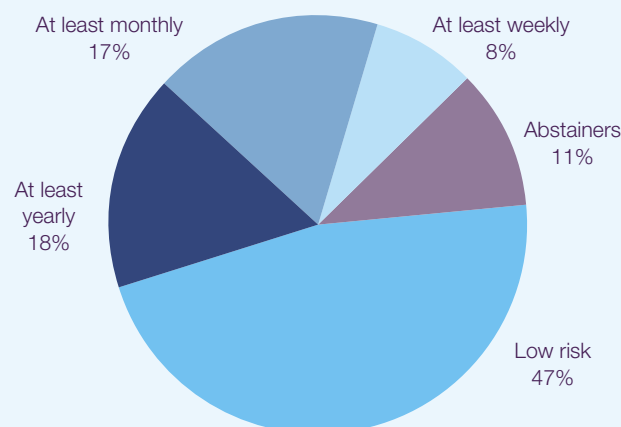


Figure 2: Proportion of the workforce aged 14 years and over drinking at risk of harm in the short-term

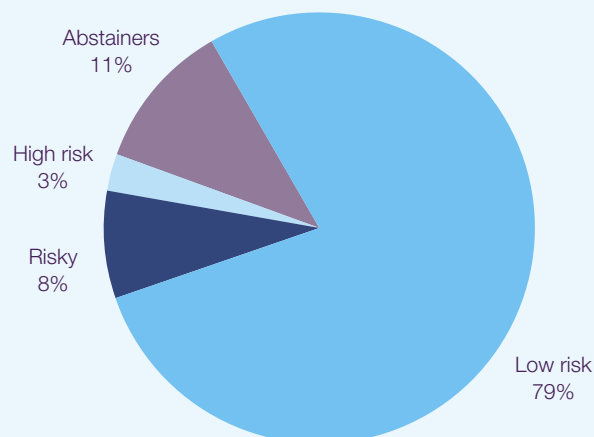


Figure 3: Proportion of the workforce aged 14 years and over drinking at risk of harm in the long-term

Industry differences (Table 2)

Risky drinking is unevenly distributed across different industry and occupational groups. The hospitality, mining and agricultural industries have the highest proportions of workers drinking at risky and high risk levels, while tradespersons and unskilled workers are the occupational groups with the highest proportions of risky and high risk drinkers, respectively. A larger percentage of workers employed in the food, beverage, and tobacco manufacturing sector reported risky consumption compared to other workers in the manufacturing industry. Similarly, a larger percentage of workers employed as health and welfare professionals reported risky consumption compared to other professionals.

The hospitality industry had the largest percentage of workers who frequently drank at short-term risky or high risk levels (15.2%). The mining industry had the largest percentage of workers who infrequently or occasionally drank at short-term risky or high risk levels (21.9% and 22.1% respectively). For long-term risk, the hospitality industry had the largest percentage of workers who drank at risky levels (13.4%), while the agricultural industry had the largest percentage of workers who drank at high risk levels (6.3%).

Within industry groups, 10.5% of workers employed in the manufacturing industry frequently drank at short-term risky or high risk levels and 7.2% drank at long-term risky levels and 3.9% at long-term high risk levels. In the food, beverage, and tobacco manufacturing sector 17.1% of workers frequently drank at short-term risky or high risk levels, and 11.1% at long-term risky levels and 5.7% at long-term high risk levels.

Occupation differences (Table 3)

Tradespersons were the occupational group with largest proportions who frequently (12.7%) or infrequently (19.7%) drank at short-term risky or high risk levels. Managers (19.6%) and professionals (19.3%) were the occupational groups with the largest proportions of occasional short-term risky or high risk drinkers. Tradespersons and unskilled workers were the occupational groups with the largest proportion of respondents who drank at long-term risky levels (10.8%), and long-term high risk levels (5.4%), respectively.

6.4% of managers frequently drank at short-term risky or high risk levels, but 12.1% of farm managers frequently drank at these levels. Among professionals, 5.5% frequently drank at short-term risky or high levels, whereas 9.9% of science and engineering professionals and 8.1% of health and welfare associate professionals frequently drank at these levels. Of all tradespersons, 19.7% infrequently and 12.7% occasionally drank at short-term risky or high risk levels, while 32.4% of food tradespersons infrequently,

and 26.5% of mechanical and fabrication engineering tradespersons occasionally, drank at these levels.

Similarly, while 7.1% of all professionals drank at long-term risky levels, 16.2% of health and welfare associate professionals drank at this level. In addition, 9.2% of all skilled workers drank at long-term risky levels, while 22.4% of skilled agriculture and horticultural workers drank at this level.

Table 2: Proportion of the workforce aged 14 years and over drinking at levels for harm in the short- and long-term, by industry classification, Australia, 2001

Industry	Short-term risk drinking (risky and high risk levels combined)			Long-term risk drinking	
	At least yearly [occasional]	At least monthly [infrequent]	At least weekly [frequent]	Risky	High risk
Agriculture	14.8%	17.1%	12.0%	7.6%	6.3%
Mining	22.1%	21.9%	8.6%	5.5%	3.7%
Manufacturing	19.9%	14.4%	10.5%	7.2%	3.9%
Construction	17.6%	19.3%	9.7%	10.9%	3.5%
Wholesale	20.7%	19.3%	7.7%	6.7%	4.2%
Retail	12.2%	20.2%	10.1%	9.7%	4.6%
Hospitality	13.8%	20.7%	15.2%	13.4%	4.6%
Transport	20.0%	18.3%	8.8%	8.6%	3.5%
Financial	18.9%	18.4%	7.3%	8.1%	2.7%
Education	14.9%	11.9%	3.8%	6.3%	0.8%
Admin and Defence	19.9%	15.7%	7.0%	6.6%	2.1%
Services	18.0%	13.2%	6.2%	8.3%	1.8%
Total*	17.3%	16.6%	8.2%	8.4%	3.1%

Shading denotes the industries with the highest proportions of risky and high risk consumption.

Row percentages do not equal 100% as short-term risk and long-term risk are discrete categories, and abstainers and low levels of risk are not included in the table.

Table 3: Proportion of the workforce aged 14 years and over drinking at levels for harm in the short- and long-term, by occupational classification, Australia, 2001

Occupation	Short-term risk drinking (risky and high risk levels combined)			Long-term risk drinking	
	At least yearly [occasional]	At least monthly [infrequent]	At least weekly [frequent]	Risky	High risk
Managers	19.6%	17.9%	6.4%	7.7%	2.6%
Professionals	19.3%	14.6%	5.5%	7.1%	1.6%
Tradespersons	17.9%	19.7%	12.7%	10.8%	4.6%
Skilled workers	15.3%	17.2%	8.5%	9.2%	2.9%
Unskilled workers	14.5%	16.8%	11.6%	8.2%	5.4%
Total*	17.2%	16.6%	8.3%	8.3%	3.1%

Shading denotes the occupations with the highest proportions of risky and high risk consumption.

Row percentages do not equal 100% as short-term risk and long-term risk are discrete categories, and low levels of risk are not included in the table.

Gender differences in industry and occupational groups

Male workers are generally the riskiest drinkers. However, there are some important exceptions to this finding. Risky drinking patterns were more predominant among women compared to males in the hospitality, retail, and financial services industries. Women in some managerial roles were found to be riskier drinkers than their male counterparts. Whether these non-traditional patterns of consumption are due to women feeling under pressure to drink in a manner commensurate with their male colleagues, or whether they are due to work-related stress or other reasons is not clear.

Overall, significantly ($p < 0.001$) more males than females drank at short-term risky and high risk levels. Exceptions however were found in the hospitality industry (F:16.0% vs M:14.3%), the retail industry (F:10.4% vs M:9.8%) and the financial services industry (F:7.7% vs M:7.0%) for frequent short-term risky and high risk drinking levels.

A larger proportion of female managers (7.3%) frequently drank at short-term risky or high risk levels compared to male managers (6.0%); this was most evident for female managing supervisors (10.9%) compared to male managing supervisors (4.2%).

Workplace culture

Current research indicates that workers' consumption patterns may be shaped by the prevailing workplace culture. For example, hospitality industry workers' high levels of risky drinking may be due to a workplace culture that condones excessive alcohol use. Within the hospitality industry, alcohol is generally widely available and the sale and use of alcohol often forms part of the industry's core business. Thus, a culture of alcohol promotion within the hospitality industry may contribute to its workers' risky consumption patterns. This is of particular concern for several reasons, not least of which is the large numbers of young workers in this industry. Young people are consistently identified as an 'at risk' population for alcohol-related harms and employment in the hospitality industry may constitute significant alcohol-related risks for young people.

For further reading

Pidd K, Berry JG, Harrison JE, Roche AM, Driscoll TR, Newson RS. *Alcohol and work: Patterns of use, workplace culture and safety*. Canberra; 2006 (AIHW Cat No. INJCAT 82). Report No.: 28.

Table 4: Proportion of the workforce aged 14 years and over drinking at levels for harm in the short-term, by age and gender, Australia, 2001

Age	Abstainers*	Low risk	Short-term risk (risky and high risk levels combined)			Total
			At least yearly [occasional]	At least monthly [infrequent]	At least weekly [frequent]	
Males						
14-19	11.1%	25.0%	18.6%	30.6%	14.7%	100%
20-29	6.9%	28.7%	22.7%	28.0%	13.8%	100%
30-39	8.0%	40.0%	24.1%	20.6%	7.3%	100%
40-49	10.4%	51.3%	18.0%	13.7%	6.7%	100%
50-59	10.0%	60.0%	13.1%	9.2%	7.7%	100%
60+	13.1%	68.1%	9.0%	4.6%	5.2%	100%
Total	9.1%	45.1%	19.2%	17.9%	8.7%	100%
Females						
14-19	12.0%	23.3%	11.2%	29.0%	24.6%	100%
20-29	7.5%	30.5%	21.6%	30.2%	10.2%	100%
30-39	12.6%	44.6%	22.2%	15.9%	4.7%	100%
40-49	12.5%	57.2%	16.0%	9.6%	4.7%	100%
50-59	15.5%	65.3%	10.4%	5.0%	3.8%	100%
60+	24.8%	66.1%	3.5%	4.0%	1.6%	100%
Total	12.5%	48.9%	17.0%	15.2%	6.4%	100%
Persons						
14-19	11.5%	24.3%	15.6%	29.9%	18.8%	100%
20-29	7.2%	29.5%	22.2%	28.9%	12.2%	100%
30-39	9.9%	41.9%	23.3%	18.7%	6.2%	100%
40-49	11.3%	53.9%	17.1%	11.9%	5.8%	100%
50-59	12.3%	62.2%	12.0%	7.4%	6.1%	100%
60+	17.6%	67.3%	6.9%	4.4%	3.8%	100%
Total	10.6%	46.7%	18.3%	16.7%	7.8%	100%

* Not consumed alcohol in the last 12 months

Table 5: Proportion of the workforce aged 14 years and over drinking at levels for harm in the long-term, by age and gender, Australia, 2001

Age	Abstainers*	Low risk	Risky	High Risk	Total
Male					
14-19	11.1%	73.0%	12.4%	3.6%	100%
20-29	6.9%	79.1%	9.5%	4.5%	100%
30-39	8.0%	84.0%	5.3%	2.7%	100%
40-49	10.4%	80.8%	6.3%	2.5%	100%
50-59	10.0%	78.8%	7.4%	3.9%	100%
60+	13.1%	77.5%	6.1%	3.3%	100%
Total	9.1%	80.4%	7.1%	3.3%	100%
Female					
14-19	12.0%	60.4%	18.1%	9.5%	100%
20-29	7.5%	75.4%	12.5%	4.5%	100%
30-39	12.6%	77.6%	8.2%	1.7%	100%
40-49	12.5%	77.7%	8.0%	1.8%	100%
50-59	15.5%	75.9%	6.8%	1.7%	100%
60+	24.8%	68.8%	6.1%	0.3%	100%
Total	12.5%	75.8%	9.1%	2.6%	100%
Persons					
14-19	11.5%	67.8%	14.7%	6.0%	100%
20-29	7.2%	77.5%	10.8%	4.5%	100%
30-39	9.9%	81.4%	6.4%	2.3%	100%
40-49	11.3%	79.4%	7.0%	2.2%	100%
50-59	12.3%	77.6%	7.2%	3.0%	100%
60+	17.6%	74.1%	6.1%	2.2%	100%
Total	10.6%	78.5%	8.0%	3.0%	100%

* Not consumed alcohol in the last 12 months.