

FACTSHEET 1

ALCOHOL AND WORK

Typical situations

An employee is known to be a heavy drinker, but is a skilled and valued member of the workforce and is still doing a good job. However, recently he seems to have been taking more time off work and is becoming unreliable.

Some of the younger employees go out on a Thursday night after being paid and come to work with hangovers or turn up late on Friday.

Poor work performance

Employers have a legitimate concern with the work performance of all employees. If a person chooses to drink alcohol, this is not in itself the concern of an employer. However, it becomes relevant if the person's job performance or behaviour on the job is affected. Experienced employees are a valuable asset, but they may become a liability if their work performance is substandard or erratic due to frequent heavy or risky patterns of drinking.

Alcohol and workplace culture

Many workers acquire their drinking habits in the workplace. The drinking culture of a workplace or occupational group can be a strong influence on risky drinking behaviours, especially among young workers. The workplace therefore can do much to influence the adoption of low-risk drinking behaviours.

Alcohol: The facts

Alcohol is a drug

Contrary to popular belief alcohol is a toxic drug, which acts as a depressant rather than a stimulant. It can poison the human body if consumed in large quantities or in combination with other drugs.

Australians are heavy drinkers

Australians are amongst the heavier drinkers in the world. Drinking alcohol is often socially expected, including at work-related events and situations. In small amounts alcohol can give people a feeling of well-being. It can make them feel more confident, talkative and relaxed. A moderate amount of alcohol does not harm most people, but regular excessive drinking can cause health problems and irregular excessive drinking places the person at elevated risk of injury.

Alcohol is implicated in:

- 18% of all injuries presenting to emergency departments
- 50% of assaults
- 44% of fire injuries
- 34% of falls and drownings
- 10% of industrial accidents.

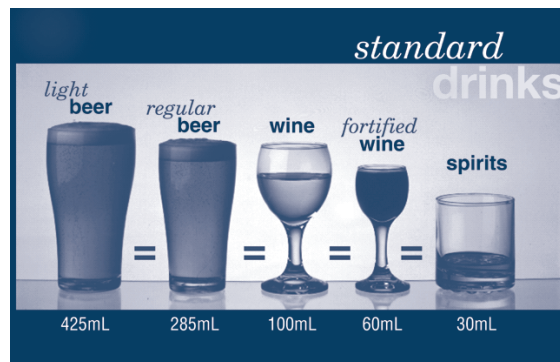
Recommended levels for low-risk drinking

Men: No more than six standard drinks a day no more than three days per week, **or** no more than four standard drinks per day if drinking more than three days per week.

Women: No more than four standard drinks a day, no more than three days per week, **or** no more than two standard drinks per day if drinking more than three days per week.

Having at least one or two alcohol free days per week is recommended.

Examples of standard drinks are:



Women's bodies contain a higher percentage of fat and a lower percentage of water than men's bodies. This means that women have proportionally less body water available to metabolise alcohol and hence reach a higher blood alcohol level than men after drinking the same amount of alcohol. In the longer term, women's health may be damaged more easily.

Blood alcohol level

The liver can only eliminate alcohol at a fixed rate of about 1 standard drink per hour. Nothing speeds this up. Black coffee, exercise, or cold showers make no difference.

You cannot reliably predict your blood alcohol level based on how you feel, so it is important to keep track of the number of standard drinks and the number of hours you have been drinking. Someone who drinks a lot at night may still have a high blood alcohol level the following day.

Mixing alcohol with other drugs

The risks associated with alcohol may increase when combined with other drugs. Alcohol can magnify the effects of sleeping pills, tranquillisers, prescribed medicines, cold remedies and cannabis. The effects of alcohol are unpredictable when combined with stimulants such as caffeine and amphetamines, and even workplace chemicals could have an interactive effect.

Risky alcohol use

Most drinking may only cause occasional problems such as a hangover or the need for a 'sickie'. Risky levels of drinking, however, significantly increase the risk of injury and accidents. They are also associated with increased absences with

headaches or flu-like symptoms or minor work-related injuries reported. Work performance can decrease and workmates may begin to cover for the person not pulling their weight. This may lead to worker discontent and lowered morale.

Longer-term effects

Anyone who regularly drinks large amounts of alcohol over a long period of time will probably experience some mental, physical or social problems. Heavy drinkers have more health problems and generally take longer to recover after an accident or illness. Risky patterns of drinking can become regular, if not habitual.

How does alcohol affect work performance?

Occupational groups

Workers in some occupational groups engage in risky or harmful drinking patterns more often than others due to a range of social and environmental factors.

These groups may include:

- trades (e.g., building, mining, construction, forestry, transport, fishing)
- hospitality industry
- women employed as specialist managers (finance, personnel, public policy, sales)
- transport, publishing, wholesale and service industries (e.g., entertainment).

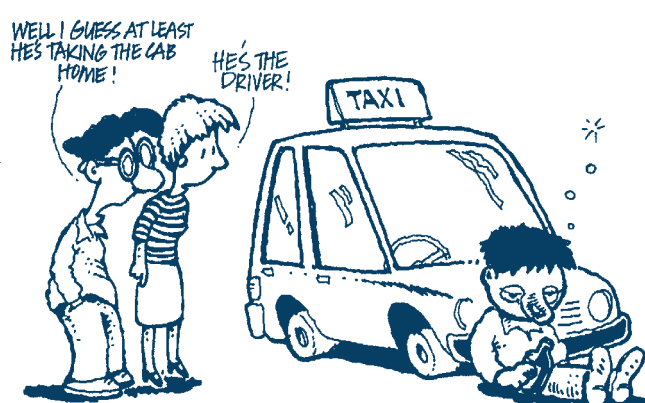
Operating machinery or driving a vehicle

Drinking even small amounts can lead to poor judgment of speed and distance and slow reaction times. Larger amounts of alcohol affect muscle coordination, reflexes, vision and hearing. Alcohol can produce a false sense of confidence about one's ability to perform tasks. About one third of all people killed on Australia's roads had alcohol in their blood at the time of the accident.

Alcohol and driving: legal limits

Be aware of the legal limits for all kinds of licences including:

- full licence holders
- learner/probationary licence holders
- boat operators
- drivers of buses, taxis, heavy goods vehicles and vehicles carrying dangerous goods.



It is possible to be charged with 'driving under the influence' if driving ability is impaired, even if your blood alcohol level is less than the legal limit. If you kill or seriously injure another person while driving under the influence of alcohol you can be charged with 'culpable driving'. Penalties can be heavy and include prison sentences. Insurance companies may not pay costs resulting from an accident if the driver drank alcohol before the accident.

Accidents

Some evidence suggests that around one quarter of all accidents at work involve intoxicated people. Young and inexperienced workers tend to have more alcohol-related accidents at work than older and more experienced employees.

Check the rules for workers compensation. A disability may not be compensable if it is wholly or predominantly due to the influence of alcohol.

Relations with customers and other employees

- An employee who has slurred speech and smells of alcohol is not a good advertisement for an organisation.
- Alcohol use can lead to a loss of inhibition and may cause aggressive or inappropriate behaviour.
- Other employees may have concerns about their own safety.
- Co-workers will soon tire of unreliable workmates and having to cover for them.
- There may be more arguments and a higher level of tension in the workplace.
- Morale will suffer.



Ability to make decisions

Alcohol consumption can lead to poor judgment and a false sense of confidence. A person using machinery is at increased risk of causing an accident. Mistakes in other areas of business can also be costly. This includes dealing with the accounts, completing order forms and invoices or simply receiving, understanding and remembering information, or giving accurate instructions.

General skills

In small amounts, alcohol is a relaxant and can appear to improve a person's mood, however, judgment, ability to think clearly and decision making abilities deteriorate. Often people are not aware of the changes and feel that they are performing more efficiently than normal, when their performance is actually much worse.



Hangovers

A hangover is partly the body's reaction to the toxic effects of alcohol and the withdrawal from alcohol. Headaches and feelings of sickness can greatly reduce efficiency at work with slower starts and lower levels of concentration. Hangovers will increase the likelihood of absenteeism from work.

Further information or help concerning alcohol can be obtained from the websites and organisations listed in Booklet 2 of the Information and Resource Package.