

Information & Data Sheet **2**

Workers' Alcohol Use and Absenteeism

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There is a large body of international research literature concerning alcohol and the workplace. Much of it concerns the prevalence of use in the workforce, or workplace and other factors contribute to use. Comparatively little has focused on the effects that workers' drinking have on the workplace.

One of the key research findings to emerge to-date concerning the effects of workers' drinking shows a consistent relationship between alcohol consumption and absenteeism. Until now, very little has been known about the precise nature of the relationship between workers' consumption patterns and absenteeism. In particular, very little was known about the profiles of risky drinkers themselves.

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.¹ Approximately 51% of this sample were in the paid workforce.²

Of the sample 11% were abstainers, 47% drank at short-term low risk levels, 8% drank at short-term risky or high risk levels frequently (at least weekly), 17% drank at short-term risky or high risk levels infrequently (at least monthly), and 18% drank at short-term risky or high risk levels occasionally (at least yearly) (see Figure 1).

That is, approximately half of the Australian workforce consumed alcohol at risky or high risk levels for short-term harm on a frequent, infrequent, or occasional basis. This pattern of drinking has a range of significant negative consequences for individual workers and their workplaces. Compared to low risk drinkers, workers who drank at risky and high risk levels were significantly more likely to be absent from work due to their alcohol use.

Survey respondents were asked to report the number of days missed from work, school, Technical and Further Education (TAFE), or university due to their personal use

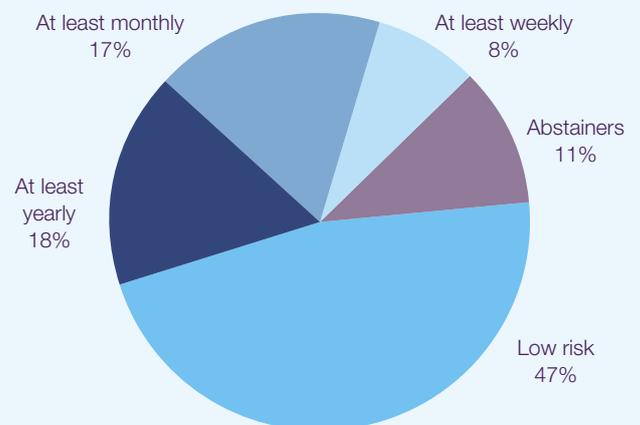


Figure 1: Proportion of the workforce aged 14 years and over drinking at risk of harm in the short-term

of alcohol in the three months prior to the survey. In addition, respondents were asked to report the number of days they had missed from work, school, TAFE, or university due to any illness or injury in the three months prior to the survey.

Approximately 40% of workers reported absences from work for any reason in the past three months and approximately 4% of workers reported absences specifically due to the effects of alcohol.

Drinkers were significantly more likely to report illness/injury-related absenteeism compared to employed abstainers. The likelihood of taking a day off work due to any illness/injury was nearly twice as likely for weekly high risk drinkers than for abstainers.

Importantly, workers who very occasionally (i.e., yearly) drank at high risk levels were also nearly twice as likely as abstainers to have had a day off for any illness or injury in the last three months.

For long-term risk drinking, low risk and risky drinkers were significantly more likely than abstainers to have had an illness/injury-related absenteeism.

Alcohol-related work absences increased with higher levels of risky consumption. Respondents who drank at short-term and long-term risky or high risk levels were significantly ($p < .01 - .001$) more likely than low risk drinkers to have missed a work day due to their alcohol use in the previous three months (Table 1).

The odds ratio for short- and long-term risk increased according to the frequency and quantity of alcohol consumed. For example, those who occasionally (at least yearly) drank at short-term risky levels were 2.7 times more likely than abstainers to miss a work day due to personal alcohol use.

Those who frequently (at least weekly) drank at short-term high risk levels were 26 times more likely than abstainers to miss a work day due personal alcohol use.

Table 1: Self-reported alcohol-related absenteeism and illness/injury absenteeism in the workforce by alcohol consumption category; Australia, 2001

	Alcohol-related absenteeism	Illness/injury absenteeism
	≥1 day missed	≥1 day missed
Short-term risk		
Abstainer	0%	31.6%
Low risk	0.8%	35.1%
Yearly risky	2.5%	40.9%
Yearly high risk	3.5%	48.1%
Monthly risky	5.9%	46.5%
Monthly high risk	10.0%	50.8%
Weekly risky	12.6%	44.0%
Weekly high risk	24.3%	54.6%
Total	3.5%	39.7%
Long-term risk		
Abstainer	0%	31.6%
Low risk	2.6%	39.9%
Risky	11.5%	44.7%
High risk	18.4%	43.3%
Total	3.5%	39.7%

Absenteeism due to any illness or injury

Workers who drank at short-term low risk and short-term risky or high risk levels were also significantly ($p < .05 - .001$) more likely than abstainers to have missed a work day due to any illness or injury in the previous three months (Table 2).

Respondents who reported missing at least one work day due to their alcohol use were approximately three times more likely to also report missing any work days due to any illness or injury compared to those who missed no work days due to alcohol.

Table 2: Likelihood (ORs) of absenteeism in the workforce by alcohol consumption level and risk category; Australia 2001*

	Alcohol-related absenteeism		Illness/injury absenteeism	
	Odds Ratio	p	Odds Ratio	p
Short-term risk				
Abstainers**	–	–	1.0	
Low**	1.0		1.2	< .05
Yearly risky	2.7	< .01	1.4	< .01
Yearly high risk	3.2	< .001	1.8	< .001
Monthly risky	5.8	< .001	1.6	< .001
Monthly high risk	9.1	< .001	1.7	< .001
Weekly risky	14.9	< .001	1.6	< .01
Weekly high risk	25.6	< .001	1.9	< .001
Long-term risk				
Abstainers**	–	–	1.0	
Low**	1.0		1.4	< .001
Risky	4.7	< .001	1.5	< .001
High risk	7.6	< .001	1.4	(ns)

Note. * Controlling for age and gender

** As abstainers did not report any alcohol-related absenteeism, low risk consumption levels were utilised as the odds ratio reference group for alcohol-related absenteeism. However, as both abstainers and recent drinkers reported illness/injury-related absences, abstainers were utilised as the odds ratio reference group for illness/injury absenteeism.

Age and Gender and Absenteeism

Young employees in particular were more likely to take days off work due to their alcohol use (Table 3). Males were more likely than females to report alcohol-related absenteeism, even though female workers have a generally higher level of absenteeism than males, largely due to childcare and family responsibilities.

Table 3: Age and gender by work days missed due to alcohol use for employed recent drinkers

	MALES	FEMALES	PERSONS
Age	1 or more	1 or more	1 or more
14–19	7.2%	11.0%	8.8%
20–29	9.2%	5.3%	7.5%
30–39	4.2%	2.0%	3.3%
40–49	2.6%	1.4%	2.1%
50–59	1.3%	0.1%	0.8%
60+	0.3%	0.0%	0.2%
Total	4.2%	2.5%	3.5%

A significantly larger percentage of males (4.2%) compared to females (2.5%) reported missing at least one work day due to their alcohol use. The likelihood of missing a work day due to alcohol use declines as workers get older (Figure 2). While 9% of respondents aged 14–19 years and 8% of respondents age 20–29 years reported missing at least one work day, only 0.2% of respondents aged 60 years and over reported missing at least one work day due to their alcohol use.

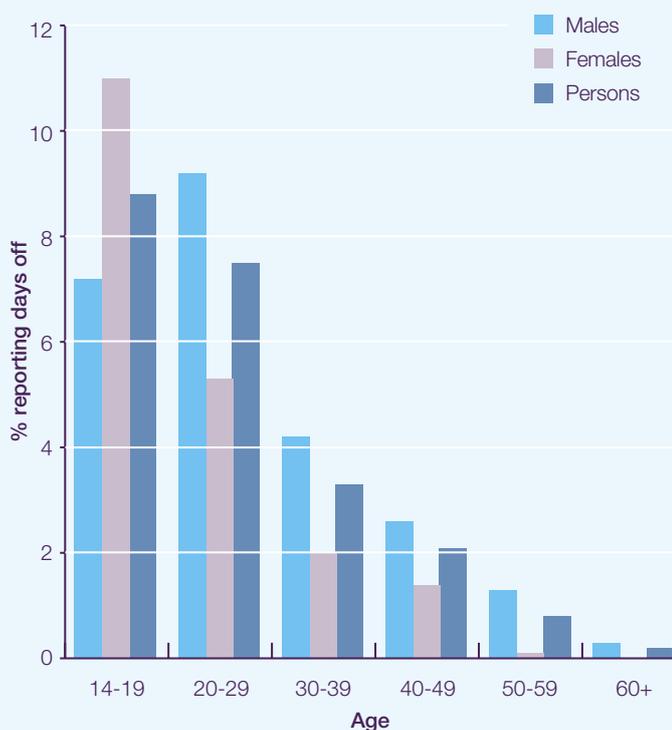


Figure 2: Proportion of employed recent drinkers aged 14 years and over, reporting days off due to alcohol use, by age group and gender

The Impact of Alcohol-related Absenteeism

While only a relatively small proportion of the drinking population (i.e., 3.5%) reported alcohol-related absenteeism, this nonetheless translates into very large numbers of workers and days off. Data from this representative sample indicate that in the three months prior to the 2001 survey approximately 267,973 Australians took at least one day off work due to their drinking. This resulted in a total of 670,716 work days lost. When extrapolated to the full working year this equates to 2.7 million work days lost in a single year from alcohol-related causes alone.

Table 4: Industry and occupation classification by work days missed due to alcohol use for employed recent drinkers

Industry	Occupation
1 or more days missed	1 or more days missed
Agriculture	Managers
Mining	Professionals
Manufacturing	Tradespersons
Construction	Skilled workers
Wholesale	Unskilled workers
Retail	Total
Hospitality	3.5%
Transport	
Financial	
Education	
Administration and Defence	
Services	
Total	3.5%

Table 5: Industry and occupation classification by work days missed due to any illness/injury

Industry	Occupation
1 or more days missed	1 or more days missed
Agriculture	Managers
Mining	Professionals
Manufacturing	Tradespersons
Construction	Skilled workers
Wholesale	Unskilled workers
Retail	Total
Hospitality	40.0%
Transport	
Financial	
Education	
Administration and Defence	
Services	
Total	39.8%

Abstainers vs Drinkers

Abstainers were significantly less likely than drinkers to have missed a work day due to illness or injury from any cause.

Abstainers were the group of workers least likely to have a day off work in the last three months compared to any other group.

Even workers who drank at low risk levels or who only drank at a risky level occasionally (i.e., yearly) were 20% and 40% (respectively) more likely to have had time off work than abstainers in the past three months.

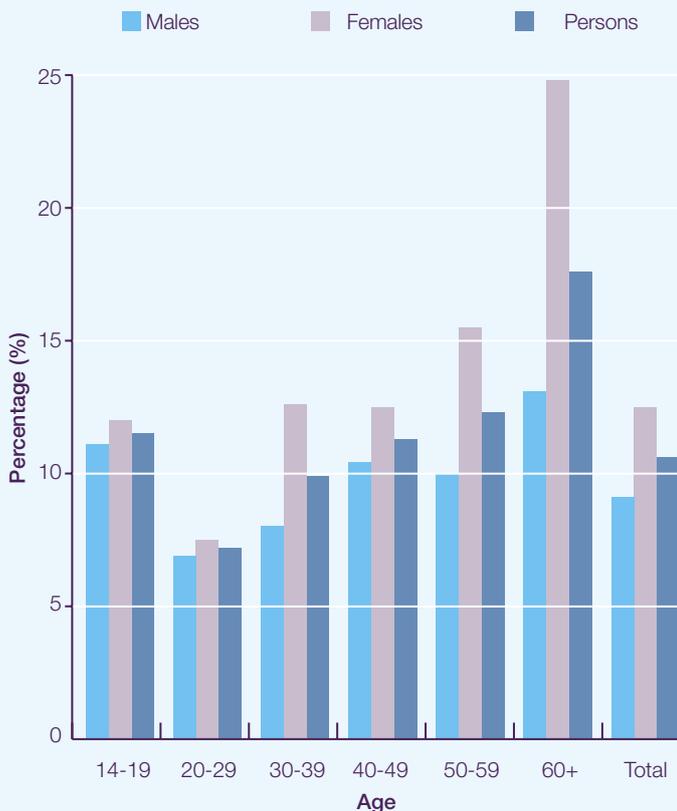


Figure 3: Proportion of abstainers aged 14 years and over, by age group and gender, Australia 2001

Prevention Issues

Most alcohol-related days of work lost are from alcohol use among drinkers who are short-term risky drinkers, and not from long-term risky drinkers. That is, it is the non-dependent but risky drinker who contributes to this high level of absenteeism in the Australian workplace.

In addition, even those who drank at risky levels infrequently or occasionally were also more likely to incur days off work than low risk drinkers or abstainers. Hence, prevention efforts directed at these groups of workers could yield great improvements in absenteeism rates.

Absenteeism from alcohol use is also heavily skewed demographically in that younger workers, and especially young males, are more likely to take an alcohol-related 'sickie'.

This is of particular relevance to industries and occupational groups with high concentrations of young male workers and to those industries and occupations identified that have atypically large proportions of heavy drinkers.

Employees' patterns of alcohol consumption have an enormous impact in terms of absenteeism. Most of the drinking involved is by non-dependent risky drinkers whose patterns of drinking are readily amenable to intervention and modification. That is, much of the loss to industry and the economy through risky drinking can be prevented.

References

1. Roy Morgan Research. (2002). *National Drug Strategy Household Survey 2001: Technical Report*. Melbourne: Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW).
2. 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.