

ALCOHOL

St. Vincent's Mental Health Service

Factsheet on drugs and alcohol and your mental health

What is alcohol?

Alcohol is produced by a process of fermentation of water, yeast, sugar and various grains, fruits or vegetables.

Standard drinks

One standard drink contains 10 grams of pure alcohol. For example:

- Light beer (2.7%) 375ml
(0.8, just under 1 standard drink)
- Mid strength beer (3.5%) 375 ml
- Regular beer (4.9%) 285 ml
- Table wine (12%) 100ml
- Spirits (40%) 30ml

How does alcohol affect you?

Alcohol is absorbed into the bloodstream through the stomach and the small intestine. The effects will depend on things like how much you drink, how quickly you drink, age, weight and sex.

Consuming alcohol may cause you to do things you would not do when sober.

The immediate effects include feeling relaxed, more confident, and sometimes happier.

Other effects include reduced concentration, slow reflexes, less inhibitions, less coordination, intense moods, confusion, nausea, vomiting and sleep.

In some doses, alcohol can cause brain damage, coma and death.

Some of the long-term effects of heavy alcohol abuse include damage to brain, liver, kidneys and stomach.

Alcohol and your mental health

If you have a history of psychosis and consume alcohol you may become more confused and disorganised, and you are more likely to hear or see things that are not happening.

Drinking alcohol increases the likelihood and severity of mood swings.

Drinking alcohol increases your risk of other problems, such as unwanted or unsafe sex, assault and problems with the law.

- Paranoia
- Loss of confidence

Symptoms of depression and anxiety may seem to reduce with the first few drinks, but are likely to become worse if you continue to drink.

Prolonged drinking can lead to:

- Problems in your relationships
- Disturbing thoughts
- Aggression and violence
- Health problems

What happens when you stop using alcohol?

If you have been using alcohol regularly you may experience withdrawal symptoms.

Physical withdrawal lasts 3-5 days and involves:

- Loss of appetite
- Increased anxiety
- Sleeping problems
- Sweating
- Irritability
- Confusion
- Tremors
- Sometimes you may have hallucinations or seizures, which can be life threatening. It is important to withdraw from alcohol under medical supervision, especially if you have been drinking heavily.

Alcohol and other drugs

Alcohol in combination with any other drug can be dangerous. The effects of the drugs may be increased or unpredictable, and may make you ill.

Taking alcohol and benzodiazepines (e.g. Valium) or opiates (e.g. heroin or methadone) together can increase the risk of overdose and even death.

Alcohol can also interfere with the effectiveness of some medication. Tell your doctor about your alcohol use.

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Reducing harm from alcohol

Low risk drinking is considered to be:

- 2 standard drinks per day for women
- 4 standard drinks per day for men
- At least two alcohol free days per week.

Other ways to reduce harm:

- Do not drink and drive.
- Arrange transport to return home after drinking.
- Eat a good meal prior to drinking.
- Drink non-alcoholic drinks in between alcoholic drinks such as soft drinks, water or juice.
- Sip slowly rather than drink fast.
- Finish your glass before getting a “top up” so you can keep track of how much you drink.
- Try to stay with people you trust.
- Always carry condoms and lube if there is any chance you may have sex.

Alcohol use and the law

If you are under 18 years old, you are breaking the law if you buy, receive, possess or drink alcohol in a hotel or public place.

What if your friend passes out?

If the person is unconscious, check their airway is clear, turn them on their side and into the recovery position. Call an ambulance on 000 and stay with them.

If breathing has stopped, give mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. If there is no pulse, start applying CPR if you are trained.

Alcohol and pregnancy

Alcohol crosses the placenta to the baby and can cause problems such as miscarriage and premature birth. There is no safe level of drinking alcohol during pregnancy.

Conclusion

Alcohol can worsen symptoms associated with mental illness.

Useful phone numbers

Emergency	000
DirectLine	1800 888 236
Drug Info	1300 858 584
Suicide Helpline	1300 651 251
Smoking Quitline	13 18 48
Family Drug Help	1300 660 068

See also: Factsheet 7

USEFUL PHONE NUMBERS & WEBSITES

St. Vincent's Mental Health Service 1300 55 88 62

Information contained in this pamphlet is offered for general purposes and should not be considered as substitute for advice from your case manager, drug and alcohol worker or doctor.