

Alcohol

What is alcohol?

Alcohol is a depressant drug, which means it slows down the messages travelling between the brain and the body.

Other names

Booze, grog, piss, liquor, charge, nip.

Effects of alcohol

There is no safe level of drug use. Use of any drug always carries some risk. It's important to be careful when taking any type of drug.

Alcohol affects everyone differently, based on:

- Size, weight and health
- Whether the person is used to taking it
- Whether other drugs are taken around the same time
- The amount drunk
- The strength of the drink

The following effects may be experienced:

- Feeling relaxed
- Trouble concentrating
- Slower reflexes
- Increased confidence
- Feeling happier or sadder, depending on your mood

If a lot of alcohol is consumed the following may also be experienced:

- Confusion
- Blurred vision
- Clumsiness
- Memory loss
- Nausea, vomiting
- Passing out
- Coma
- Death

Consuming a lot of alcohol can lead to coma or death.

Hangovers

The following day, the effects of a hangover may be experienced including:

- Headache
- Diarrhoea and nausea
- Tiredness and trembling
- Increased heart rate and blood pressure
- Dry mouth and eyes
- Trouble concentrating
- Anxiety
- Restless sleep

Sobering up

To sober up takes time. The liver gets rid of about one standard drink an hour. Sweating it out with exercise, cold showers, coffee, fresh air and/or vomiting will not speed up the process. They may ease the symptoms, but they do not remove alcohol from the bloodstream any faster. This means it may not be safe to drive or work the following day.

Long term effects

Regular use of alcohol may eventually cause:

- Regular colds or flu
- Difficulty getting an erection (males)
- Depression
- Poor memory and brain damage
- Difficulty having children (males and females)
- Liver disease
- Cancer
- High blood pressure and heart disease
- Needing to drink more to get the same effect
- Dependence on alcohol
- Financial, work and social problems

Why does alcohol affect unborn babies?

Any alcohol you drink passes through the placenta to your baby at the same levels of concentration as in your bloodstream – your body does not break down the alcohol before it reaches the baby. As the fetus is very small and undeveloped it can't process the alcohol as well as your body, which means the alcohol can damage the baby's developing cells.

The alcohol can also harm the blood flow between the placenta and fetus, which can lead to reduced oxygen to the baby's body tissues such as the brain, heart, pulmonary vessels, and liver. This is known as hypoxia.

Drinking alcohol with other drugs

The effects of drinking and taking other drugs – including over-the-counter or prescribed medications – can be unpredictable and dangerous, and could cause:

Alcohol + cannabis: nausea, vomiting, panic, anxiety and paranoia.

The liver gets rid of about one standard drink an hour. Sweating it out with exercise, cold showers, coffee, fresh air and/or vomiting will not speed up the process.

Alcohol + energy drinks (with caffeine), ice, speed or ecstasy: more risky behaviour, body under great stress, overdose more likely.

Alcohol + GHB or benzodiazepines: decreased heart rate, overdose more likely.

Withdrawal

Giving up alcohol after drinking it for a long time is challenging because the body has to get used to functioning without it. Please seek advice from a health professional.

Withdrawal symptoms usually start about 4 to 12 hours after the last drink and can last for about 4 to 5 days. These symptoms can include:

- Sweating
- Tremors
- Nausea
- Anxiety, irritability, difficulty sleeping
- Seizures or fits
- Delusions and hallucinations
- Death

References for this fact sheet are available at: druginfo.adf.org.au.

Further Information

The Druginfo website has information on:

- Help & support services
- Treatment
- Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders
- Standard drinks
- Guidelines for low-risk drinking
- Binge drinking

Go to druginfo.adf.org.au

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