

Alex's story

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A couple of months ago I was out at a friend's gig. One of my housemates announced she was 'up for a big one', and despite our advice starting drinking vodka & red bull early. I kept an eye on her expecting the worst, but to my surprise she looked like she was having a ball – she was dancing, laughing & showed no signs of slowing up. However, when we got back to our place, it seemed to instantly catch up with her. She sprinted into the bathroom and stayed there. It was nasty.

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Alcohol

**Facts
about**



Facts about Alcohol

Alcohol is everywhere. It's the most commonly used drug in Australia and its use is firmly embedded in our culture. Most people who use alcohol drink a moderate amount and enjoy the effect, but others find that at times their alcohol use can have some unpleasant consequences and can lead to problems for them, their friends, families and society in general.

Many people use alcohol to relax, and it can also make people feel more sociable as it reduces inhibitions. Like other depressants, it slows down the functions of your central nervous system, but its effects can vary depending on how you are feeling (tired, hungry, angry, or depressed), what is happening around you, and how much and how quickly you drink. Mixing alcohol with other drugs (depressants, stimulants or hallucinogens) will increase the potential effects.

How the body absorbs alcohol is affected by factors including age, weight, gender and whether or not you have eaten before you start drinking. Blood Alcohol Concentration (BAC) – this is what is measured when you are stopped and breathalyzed by the police - is broken down at a fixed rate. You can't speed up the process by having coffee (or other stimulants), having a cold shower, or exercising. They may make you feel more alert, but they won't change BAC.

The more alcohol you use, the more negative effects you are likely to feel. A hangover is one that many people have experienced, but alcohol can also increase negative feelings such as anxiety and depression. Loss of inhibitions can also contribute to risk-taking or other behavior you'll regret the next day. In the longer term, regular, heavy use increases the chances of long term health problems such as liver and stomach damage, cancer, permanent brain injury and other nervous system damage.

Reducing the harms

It's important to remember that not everyone develops problems with drinking alcohol. If you decide to drink, there are a number of ways that you can minimise the possible damage. Here are a few:

Think about whether this is a good time to use alcohol

- There are definitely times when you shouldn't drink. If you are pregnant, alcohol consumption poses potential risk to your baby. If you are ill or if you are taking medication, check with your doctor or pharmacist whether you are able to drink alcohol and how your medication may interact with it. Because alcohol slows your reaction speed, you should avoid drinking if you are planning to operate machinery, drive, or play sport.
- Don't drink every day. It's really important to give your body a rest. Daily drinking can weaken your immune system and make you more susceptible to illness or long-term complications.

Poly-drug use

- Avoid poly-drug use (mixing alcohol with other drugs including prescribed and over the counter medication). Alcohol and benzodiazepines (e.g. Valium) or opiates (e.g. medication containing codeine) are particularly bad mixes. Most overdoses involve a mix of depressant drugs. Mixing alcohol with stimulants (like caffeine or amphetamines) can make you less aware of the effects of each drug and can lead to unpredictable results.

Taking care of yourself

- If you are drinking, make sure you eat beforehand or, at the very least, have something to eat whilst you are drinking. Food in the stomach slows the rate alcohol is absorbed into the bloodstream. A healthy diet is one of the best ways to prevent some alcohol related harms.

- There are a number of ways you can minimise the harm a drinking session might do. Set limits before you start. Drink water or a soft drink in between alcoholic drinks. Get your alcoholic drinks served in small glasses and get a new drink each time rather than topping up the same one – this will help you to keep track of how much you are drinking. Don't get involved in shouting rounds – this can make you drink more than you might otherwise in order to keep up.
- Don't drink and drive! Just don't even risk it. Depending on how much you've had to drink, you might be feeling 'fine' but your BAC could still be over .05 (the legal driving limit unless you are on your 'P' plates or a taxi driver – then it's 0). Plan a different way to get home, and don't get into a car with anyone else who has been drinking. If driving the next day, remember that you may still be over the limit.



Australian drinking guidelines suggest that, whilst there is no 'safe' level of drinking, drinking no more than two standard drinks a day is a life-long low risk amount. If you decide to drink more than this on specific occasions, drinking no more than four standard drinks in any one session will lower your risk of injury.