

ALCOHOL AND MENTAL HEALTH



PUT YOUR MIND

AT EASE
RECOGNISE > ACT > MAINTAIN

Alcohol use is an accepted and often enjoyable part of our lives and Australian culture. However, the misuse of alcohol is one of the leading causes of preventable death in Australia.

For most veterans who drink at low-risk levels, alcohol is just part of the mix in a healthy lifestyle that includes good diet and regular exercise. In recent research, however, some veterans said that they drink to cope with anger, stress and sleeplessness.

How does alcohol affect my health?

Excessive alcohol use is related to a variety of physical and mental health and social consequences.

Drinking in excess of the low-risk drinking guidelines (see www.therightmix.gov.au) can have a range of short-term health effects and can have a negative impact on:

- The brain
- Stress levels, sleep patterns and sexual function
- The gut and pancreas
- The heart and the circulatory system

Over time, drinking too much increases your risk of developing:

- Cancer
- Cirrhosis of the liver
- Brain cell damage and memory loss
- Alcohol dependence

How does alcohol relate to other mental health problems such as depression, anxiety or PTSD?

The relationship between alcohol misuse and other mental health problems is complex. Alcohol misuse can be a cause of a number of mental health conditions such as alcohol dependence and alcohol related dementia.

Alcohol dependence or even problem drinking can often make it difficult to assess and treat co-existing mental health disorders such as depression and anxiety disorders, and PTSD.

Most veterans who have tried to control the symptoms of PTSD, anxiety or depression with alcohol know it doesn't work. In fact most veterans and their partners will agree that alcohol usually makes the symptoms worse.



How does alcohol impact on family and relationships?

Alcohol misuse and problem drinking can have a major impact on family, friends and community. It often contributes to violence and conflict in families. And the amount of money spent on alcohol may place additional financial pressures on families.

Where a person is alcohol dependent or has a drinking problem, other family members can feel isolated, unsure about how to help or even how to discuss the impact it is having on their family.

Does drinking affect my sexual performance?

Yes. From personal experience, most men know there is a link between alcohol and erectile dysfunction. Despite this, there is often an assumption that alcohol actually improves sexual activity. In fact, a pattern of heavy drinking can cause sexual dysfunction, or at least become an issue in relationships.

So if I drink at low-risk levels, I'm OK?

Generally yes, but you need to take particular care with alcohol if:

- You have heart disease, high blood pressure or are gaining weight
- You have a physical health or social problem made worse by alcohol
- You experience depression, anxiety or PTSD
- You experience irritability or mood swings
- Your family has a history of alcohol-related problems
- You're going to drive or use machinery

Can I drink when I'm on medication?

You need to take special care with alcohol if you're on medication. Alcohol can have harmful effects when combined with medication. Your medication may not work as well, or not at all, if you drink. Alcohol can be particularly dangerous when used with other drugs

that have similar effects, such as sleeping pills and antidepressants. You should talk to your doctor or pharmacist about the possible effects of alcohol on your medication.

Does alcohol help me sleep?

Alcohol might knock you out for a few hours, but it usually causes a disrupted sleep, early morning waking or insomnia. This may cause anxiety and stress that leads to more drinking.

Can I drink the same amount as I get older?

As you get older, your body doesn't handle alcohol like it used to. You've got less water in your body to absorb the alcohol, so more stays in your bloodstream, affecting you faster than it used to. Older people should certainly avoid drinking at risky levels. You should also have one or two alcohol-free days each week.

Does alcohol pep you up or slow you down?

One or two drinks can help us relax and feel less inhibited.

However, alcohol is a powerful depressant – it slows you down. Depressant drugs do not necessarily make you feel depressed. Rather, they slow down the messages going to and from the brain and body. This is why we have less control over our behaviour after we've been drinking.

Where can I go for more information or help?

- Talk to your doctor or health professional about your health and alcohol
- Call WVCS – Veterans and Veterans Families Counselling Service about counselling and their group programs on **1800 011 046**
- For more information call DVA on **133 254**
- Assess your drinking patterns and get more information at **www.therightmix.gov.au** and **www.dva.gov.au**