



Alcohol

Alcohol is the most commonly used drug in New Zealand. Because of the number of people who drink alcohol, it causes more damage than any other drug used in NZ. Problems range from the occasional hangover to alcohol dependence. About 10% of people who drink alcohol will become dependent; they come from all walks of life – doctors, lawyers, artists, farmers, retailers, unemployed. They are mothers, fathers, sons and daughters, sisters, brothers, cousins and neighbours. In other words, anyone can develop problems with alcohol.

What alcohol does

Alcohol is a Central Nervous System (CNS) depressant. This does not mean it makes us depressed (though it can); it means it slows brain activity - our ability to function mentally and physically is reduced. People are affected differently depending on factors including:

- How much alcohol is consumed and how quickly
- A person's body weight
- Gender: it takes women longer to process the same size drink
- Whether alcohol is consumed on a full or empty stomach
- Whether other drugs including medication have been used
- Whether a person has existing health issues.

Pregnant women, older people, and those who have previously had problems with alcohol and other drugs face additional risks. Plus there are particular risks associated with drinking and driving, operating machinery, being in or on water, as well as using alcohol to assist sleep (actually makes it worse) or to relieve stress or unhappiness.

So how much can I safely drink?

Ministry of Health guidelines say long term health risks can be reduced by having at least 2 alcohol-free days every week and:

- 2 standard drinks a day for women and no more than 10 standard drinks a week
- 3 standard drinks a day for men and no more than 15 standard drinks a week.

Not drinking alcohol is the safest option for anyone aged under 18. Those under 15 years of age are at the greatest risk of harm from drinking alcohol. Please note: these guidelines DO NOT relate to driving. We recommend that drivers aged under 20 do not drink at all as the legal limit is effectively zero for them.

What is a standard drink?



A standard drink contains 10 grams of pure alcohol.

It is important to note that drink serving sizes are often more than one standard drink.

Look on the bottle or can to find the number of standard drinks it contains.

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When alcohol becomes a problem

Nearly 20% of people who drank alcohol last year had “hazardous drinking patterns”. In other words they drank more than is safe, lost control and experienced blackouts and hangovers along with other problems.

People who do this can change the way they drink by reducing or eliminating the harms or problems they cause for both the person drinking and for others. This usually involves purposefully changing how often and how much they drink (controlled drinking), avoiding people and places which lead to problems, and developing better coping skills to deal with life’s stresses.

Tolerance and dependence

When you’re using alcohol or other drugs your body (and mind) gets used to it and you need to take more to get the desired effect. In other words you become tolerant to a certain amount. When people become dependent on alcohol their thoughts feelings and emotions revolve around alcohol to the exclusion of most other things and they experience withdrawal symptoms if they stop drinking.

You don’t have to be drinking secretly to be alcohol dependent. Many people continue to work and on the surface at least appear to be managing well. However, anyone drinking dependently will find it difficult to control their drinking and the best option for most will be to become alcohol-free.

It can take time to become ready to acknowledge the problems alcohol is causing. Making change is never easy and maintaining the change is even harder and it can take several attempts before achieving your goal. This is quite normal.

Pregnancy

There is **no known safe level** of alcohol consumption during pregnancy. Every time a pregnant woman drinks, the alcohol passes from her bloodstream through the placenta to the unborn baby. The mother’s alcohol level is the same for the unborn baby. Alcohol is also absorbed into the fluid surrounding the unborn baby (amniotic fluid) and this fluid is swallowed by the unborn baby.

Binge drinking is linked to increased risk of stillbirth and regular drinking (having five or more drinks per week on a regular basis) during pregnancy is linked to miscarriages. Alcohol use during pregnancy can cause Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) which is an umbrella term for a range of adverse effects on foetal development. No one knows exactly what the threshold is for causing the disorder so it is safest to avoid alcohol while pregnant.

Looking for help?

If you’re just looking for information or maybe want to talk with someone about an alcohol issue for yourself or someone close to you then call **Auckland CADS** on **09 845 1818**

Other services

Alcohol drug helpline: Phone 0800 787 797 or free txt 8681 and they will txt you back for a free, confidential conversation

Health Promotion Agency: For information on standard drinks, the law, alcohol and your kids, or to see if your drinking’s ok go to <https://www.hpa.org.nz/programme/alcohol>

Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) is a mutual aid fellowship for people who are experiencing or who have experienced problems with alcohol. Phone 0800 229 6757 email help@aa.org.nz or look at <https://aa.org.nz/>

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