

Alcohol factsheet

Why target alcohol?

Alcohol is the most widely used psychoactive (mood changing) drug in Australia and can result in a range of physical, emotional and social harms. In the workplace, alcohol can also have a detrimental impact on safety and health. Alcohol reduces a person's ability to work safely by affecting the nervous system, coordination, motor control, concentration, alertness and impeding the ability to exercise judgment.

Under the *Occupational Safety and Health Act* (1984) employers have a duty of care to protect workers from known hazards and risks. This includes any impairment that may arise from the effects of alcohol. *The Act* also states that workers must take reasonable care for their own health and safety at work to avoid harming the health and safety of other people through any act or omission. See WorkSafe WA's *Guidance Note on Alcohol and Other Drugs at the Workplace* for information on meeting your duty of care.

The *Australian Guidelines to Reduce Health Risks from Drinking Alcohol* recommend that men and women who drink, drink no more than two standard drinks on any day to reduce their lifetime risk of harm from alcohol related disease or injury. With one in eight adults drinking at levels that are dangerous to their health, it is important to create an alcohol free workplace.¹ There may be occasions when this is not possible, in which case the workplace should support workers to avoid alcohol and/or drink responsibly. Workplaces can also play a vital role in supporting staff with long term alcohol issues to reduce their current drinking levels.

The effects of alcohol

Even though alcohol may not be available in the workplace, it may be present at work-related functions or social events. At these events the employer still has a duty of care to ensure the health and safety of their workers.

Drinking alcohol can:

- » Affect people's ability to work efficiently and perform tasks safely
- » Cause liver or brain damage, heart disease, high blood pressure and increase the risk from some cancers
- » Increase the risk of injury through road trauma, violence, falls and accidental death
- » Lead to weight gain and obesity
- » Harm the developing foetus in women who are pregnant, or a breastfeeding baby

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What can we do about it?

Managing alcohol in the workplace is a multifaceted process, but is vital in creating a safe and healthy environment. Every workplace is different, therefore, responses to alcohol need to be tailored to the specific needs and situation of your workplace if they are going to be effective.

To target alcohol in your workplace:

- » Develop and enforce a policy that provides and promotes an alcohol free workplace, thus minimising health and safety risks associated with alcohol consumption
- » Adopt a policy or stance that prevents gifting alcohol or using alcohol as an incentive
- » Display information throughout the workplace that promotes responsible use of alcohol, like the posters and brochures produced by *Alcohol, Think Again*
- » Limit the number of alcoholic drinks (e.g. one or two standard drinks) that are provided free to each person at workplace functions and social events
- » Ensure that alcohol is not the primary focus at workplace functions and social events; activities may include movie screenings, team games or a family fun day at a local park
- » Organise and promote safe transport options (e.g. taxis vouchers and public transport) at events where alcohol is available
- » Provide staff with free, independent and confidential counselling through an Employee Assistance Program, where necessary

References:

1. Australian Bureau of Statistic. 2006. Alcohol Consumption in Australia: A Snapshot 2004-2005. Cat No. 4832.0.55.001. Canberra. Australian Bureau of Statistic. Viewed at: <http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/mf/4832.0.55.001>

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