



**AUSTRALIAN
ALCOHOL
GUIDELINES**

**Health
Risks
and
Benefits**

Endorsed
October 2001

National Health and

NUMBER OF STANDARD DRINKS



1.5

375ml
Full Strength Beer
4.9% Alc./Vol



1

375ml
Mid Strength Beer
3.5% Alc./Vol



0.8

375ml
Light Beer
2.7% Alc./Vol



1.5

375ml
Full Strength Beer
4.9% Alc./Vol



1

375ml
Mid Strength Beer
3.5% Alc./Vol



0.8

375ml
Light Beer
2.7% Alc./Vol



1

285ml Middy/Pot*
Full Strength Beer
4.9% Alc./Vol



0.7

285ml Middy/Pot*
Mid Strength Beer
3.5% Alc./Vol



0.5

285ml Middy/Pot*
Light Beer
2.7% Alc./Vol



1.5

375ml
Pre-mix Spirits
5% Alc./Vol



1.5

340ml
Alcoholic Soda
5.5% Alc./Vol



1

30ml
Spirit Nip
40% Alc./Vol



24

750ml
Bottle of Spirits
40% Alc./Vol



1

100ml
Standard Serve
of Wine
12% Alc./Vol



1.8

160ml
Average Restaurant
Serve of Wine
12% Alc./Vol



7

750ml
Bottle of Wine
12% Alc./Vol



36

4 Litres
Cask Wine
12% Alc./Vol

* NSW, WA, ACT = Middy; VIC, QLD, TAS = Pot; NT = Handle; SA = Schooner

- *short-term risk*—the risk of harm (particularly injury or death) in the short-term, that is associated with given levels of drinking on a single day. These levels assume that overall drinking patterns remain within the levels set for long-term risk, and that these heavier drinking days occur a maximum of three times per week. Outside these limits, risk is further increased.

It is this latter category that marks the current guidelines as being distinctly different from previous ones.

The terms ‘alcoholism’ or ‘alcoholics’ are avoided as they are ambiguous and stigmatising. Instead, the term ‘dependence’ is used. Alcohol dependence is a complex phenomenon that is discussed on page 75. In brief, it refers to situations where drinking is given priority over other behaviours that the person had previously found much more important. Dependence ranges from mild to severe. People with severe dependence drink regularly above guideline levels, often find it hard to limit how much they drink, and generally have marked tolerance to the effects of alcohol. If they stop drinking for a few hours, they experience both physical and psychological withdrawal symptoms, such as tremulousness and anxiety.

‘Intoxication’ is a widely used term with no consistent or formally agreed definition. It is usually taken to refer to an elevated blood alcohol concentration such that a person cannot function within their normal range of physical and cognitive abilities. Levels above 0.05 or 0.08 are sometimes taken as a proxy measure of intoxication. In lay terms, it is a subjective feeling, the experience of a substantial effect of alcohol on mood, cognition, and psycho-motor function. There are marked variations in the amount of alcohol different people need to consume in order to experience intoxication.

Further definitions of terms used in this document can be found in the Glossary and Acronyms section (page 125).

‘A STANDARD DRINK’

A clear understanding of what constitutes a ‘standard drink’ is essential for the accurate interpretation and application of these guidelines. The present guidelines follow the previous Australian drinking guidelines (NHMRC 1992), in defining a standard drink as containing 10 grams of alcohol (equivalent to 12.5 millilitres of alcohol). Where possible, in discussing the evidence, amounts of alcohol are defined in grams and Australian standard drinks. The notion of a standard drink is used widely, but the definition varies from country to country.

In Australia, all bottles, cans and casks containing beverage alcohol are required by law to state on the label the approximate number of standard drinks they contain. Table 2 provides a rough guide.

It can sometimes be difficult to translate standard drinks into real life situations. There are no common glass sizes used across all public drinking environments, let alone in private homes, and people commonly underestimate what they drink. The

problem is compounded where large containers (jugs, casks, flagons) are shared, where glasses are topped up by another person, or where the composition of mixed drinks is not known (eg cocktails or punch at a party). Hence, it may be challenging to calculate accurately the numbers of standard drinks consumed.

Table 2: Numbers of Australian standard drinks in common containers of various alcoholic beverages

Light beer (2.7%):	
1 can or stubbie	= 0.8 of a standard drink
Medium light beer (3.5% alcohol):	
1 can or stubbie	= 1 standard drink
Regular beer (4.9% alcohol):	
1 can or stubbie	= 1½ standard drinks
1 jug	= 4 standard drinks
1 slab (cans or stubbies)	= about 36 standard drinks
Wine (9.5%–13% alcohol):	
750-ml bottle	= about 7 to 8 standard drinks
4-litre cask	= about 30 to 40 standard drinks
Spirits:	
1 nip (30 ml)	= 1 standard drink
Pre-mixed spirits (around 5% alcohol):	
1 can (375 ml)	= 1½ standard drinks

There is a body of opinion that the term ‘standard drink’ should be replaced by ‘standard unit’, because of the ease with which a standard drink is confused with a (usually larger) serving of drink. While the Working Party shares this concern, it considers that any change that has major implications for public and professional education needs to be carefully considered and debated. ‘Standard unit’ is, however, the measure used in the United Kingdom. This issue should be pursued and reconsidered next time these guidelines are reviewed, if not before.