

# Australians and Alcohol



## INSIDE

- Everything in moderation
- Less is more
- Medication alert

The *GSK Health Index* is a web-based survey that is independently carried out by Pure Profile Research on behalf of GlaxoSmithKline Australia. The survey uses a sample of 1000 adult Australians and is weighted to be representative of the general Australian population.

# Welcome to the second *GSK Health Index* report.

THE health of the Australian population is continually improving and Australians are more aware of their health and wellbeing than ever before. Compared to previous generations we now live longer and are starting to see change at a community level that is being driven by government and more importantly, by us, the consumer.

The *GSK Health Index* aims to provide a snapshot of Australians' understanding of, and behaviour toward, health and health-related issues. Using a 'baseline' series of questions, the survey provides

an ongoing comparison of health behaviour amongst Australians with a view to identifying trends. The survey also has a number of changing questions that focus on a specific, topical health issue.

This quarter's report explores alcohol, including how much we drink, why we drink and how much we spend on drinking.

The *GSK Health Index* report is free. To obtain a copy of the report visit [www.gsk.com.au](http://www.gsk.com.au)

# Everything in moderation



## Factors that affect susceptibility to alcohol

- ▶ Sex;
- ▶ Age;
- ▶ Mental health;
- ▶ Sleeping patterns;
- ▶ Medications;
- ▶ Illicit drugs;
- ▶ Health conditions; and
- ▶ A family history of alcohol dependence.

ALCOHOL is the most widely used recreational drug in Australia, and it's easy to see why it is such a big part of our laid back culture, when it goes hand in hand with the things we are famous for, like barbecues, sport and the beach. Overindulgence of alcohol can have a detrimental affect on our health, which highlights the importance of monitoring our drinking habits.

Nearly seven per cent of people surveyed in the *GSK Health Index* admitted to having over 20 standard drinks a week, which increases their risk of alcohol related harm. Short term affects include violence, risky behaviours, road accidents and falls. While long term affects include physical and mental health problems, such as cirrhosis of the liver, cancer and memory problems.

A standard drink contains 10 grams or 12.5 millilitres of alcohol. Australian guidelines suggest the following drinking levels for men and women:

### WOMEN:

- ▶ An average of no more than two standard drinks a day.
- ▶ No more than four standard drinks in any one day.
- ▶ One to two alcohol free days per week.

### MEN:

- ▶ An average of no more than four standard drinks a day.
- ▶ No more than six standard drinks on any one day.
- ▶ One to two alcohol free days per week.

“It can be difficult to estimate how many drinks you have had in a social situation, because different drinks have different quantities of alcohol in them and can vary according to the size of the glass it is served in. This can lead to underestimating how much you drink.”

— DR EUGENE GOH, GLAXOSMITHKLINE

# Less is more

THE *GSK Health Index* has shown that Australians are starting to drink at a younger age. The survey found that 11 per cent of Australians aged 18 to 24 were 12 years or younger when they had their first alcoholic drink, compared to four per cent of 55 to 64 year olds. And 42 per cent of 18 to 24 year olds were between 12 and 15 years when they had their first drink, compared to 17 per cent of 45 to 54 year olds.

DrinkWise Australia confirms that this is a growing trend, and that the incidence of binge drinking is also on the rise.

Binge drinking is defined as heavy drinking over a short period of time, or drinking continuously over a number

of days or weeks. Binge drinkers don't necessarily drink often, but when they do, tend to overindulge to an extreme level. This can result in serious consequences on a person's health and wellbeing in the short and long term.

Although binge drinking is usually associated with younger age groups, the *GSK Health Index* found that Australians aged 55 to 64 were more likely to have 20 or more standard drinks a week, compared to Australians aged 18 to 24. This result goes against the common conception that young adults are binge drinkers, while older Australians are more responsible and highlights the fact that everyone needs to be responsible when it comes to alcohol.

“Several studies have shown that starting to drink at an early age increases the likelihood of a person developing alcohol related physical and mental health problems later in life.”

—DR SELWYN FUNG, GLAXOSMITHKLINE

## Want to know more about healthy drinking but not sure where to start?

The following websites may be a good starting point.

**Department of Health and Ageing:**  
[www.alcohol.gov.au](http://www.alcohol.gov.au)

**DrinkWise:**  
[www.drinkwise.com.au](http://www.drinkwise.com.au)

**Australian Drug Foundation:**  
[www.adf.org.au](http://www.adf.org.au)

**National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre:**  
[www.ndarc.med.unsw.edu.au](http://www.ndarc.med.unsw.edu.au)

## Interesting facts:

- ▶ A quarter of Australians drink because of work related stress.
- ▶ Women aged 35 to 44 are most likely to drink because of work related stress.
- ▶ 80 per cent of Australians have never called in sick because of a hangover.
- ▶ 18 to 24 year olds are most likely to call in sick because of a hangover.
- ▶ 70 per cent of Australians spend less than \$25 a week on alcohol.
- ▶ Women spend less on alcohol than men.



# Medication alert

A staggering 48 per cent of people surveyed in the *GSK Health Index* admitted to mixing alcohol with prescription medications, which can be a lethal combination.

Alcohol can interact with many prescription and over-the-counter medications, including herbal supplements. This can alter the way the medication and alcohol is absorbed by the body, which can result in physical and mental side effects. Drowsiness and dizziness are common side effects.

Alcohol-medication interactions can occur with as little as one drink and the effect it can have differs from person to person. Common medications that interact with alcohol include those used to treat:

- Blood pressure;
  - Blood clots;
  - Arthritis;
  - Diabetes; and
  - Epilepsy.
- As well as:
- Antibiotics;
  - Antidepressants;
  - Antihistamines; and
  - Cough medicines.

**“Older Australians in particular, should monitor their drinking habits, and consult their GP or pharmacist if they are unsure if their medications interact with alcohol.”**

— DR SELWYN FUNG, GLAXOSMITHKLINE

Generally speaking, older people are more likely to be on prescription medications than younger people, yet 45 per cent of people aged 55 to 64 years and 43 per cent of people aged 65 years and above admitted to mixing alcohol with prescription medications in the *GSK Health Index*. Dr Selwyn Fung of GlaxoSmithKline recommends any Australian who is unsure about their medications to speak to a doctor or pharmacist about potential interactions with alcohol.



## People taking medications:

- ▶ Should carefully read the labels and information sheets that come with their medications to check for harmful interactions with alcohol or other substances.
- ▶ Are advised to be very cautious if drinking alcohol while using benzodiazepines, methadone or other central nervous system depressants.
- ▶ Are at greater risk of increasing the effects of alcohol and/or decreasing the effectiveness of their medication, particularly if they are on more than one medication.
- ▶ Should consult their doctor or pharmacist to discuss any aspect of their medication.

## REFERENCES

Department of Health and Ageing. *National Alcohol Strategy 2006-2009*. Viewed 20 July 2008 at: <http://www.alcohol.gov.au/internet/alcohol/publishing.nsf/Content/nas-06-09>

National Alcohol Strategy. *Alcohol and Your Health*. Viewed 20 July 2008 at: [http://www.alcohol.gov.au/internet/alcohol/publishing.nsf/Content/01212F447EC2AD34CA257261001F1ACB/\\$File/alcfs15.pdf](http://www.alcohol.gov.au/internet/alcohol/publishing.nsf/Content/01212F447EC2AD34CA257261001F1ACB/$File/alcfs15.pdf)

National Alcohol Strategy. *Alcohol and Medications*. Viewed 20 July 2008 at: [http://www.alcohol.gov.au/internet/alcohol/publishing.nsf/Content/01212F447EC2AD34CA257261001F1ACB/\\$File/alcfs06.pdf](http://www.alcohol.gov.au/internet/alcohol/publishing.nsf/Content/01212F447EC2AD34CA257261001F1ACB/$File/alcfs06.pdf)