

Reducing alcohol and other drugs



FACT SHEET 9

Sometimes people use alcohol, cigarettes, marijuana and other drugs to deal with their problems and feelings. These substances can cause long-term problems.

Most illegal drugs and alcohol interfere with the effects of prescribed antidepressant drugs. If you've been drinking large amounts of alcohol or taking other drugs, tell your doctor so you can get the appropriate treatment.

Your doctor can also help you make a plan to stop smoking cigarettes. This is important as cigarette smoking has negative effects on both your physical and mental health.

DRINKING ALCOHOL

- Risky levels of drinking can impact on both physical and mental health.
- For people experiencing depression or anxiety, a low-risk level of drinking may mean not drinking any alcohol at all. **It's important to discuss with your doctor what your safe drinking levels are.**
- Alcohol has a brief mood-lifting effect, but later causes feelings of depression. Any short-term relief alcohol provides doesn't last and it can result in long-term harm.
- Intoxication and depression can be a dangerous combination which puts a person at risk of suicide.
- The Australian guidelines to reduce health risks from drinking alcohol¹ provide information on reducing risks to health from drinking alcohol for men and women. This includes drinking no more than two standard drinks per day to reduce health risks over a lifetime.

CIGARETTE SMOKING

- Many people with depression or anxiety take up cigarette smoking and soon become addicted to nicotine.
- Smokers are twice as likely to have a major depressive disorder as the general population.
- Smokers are likely to increase smoking when depressed.
- People who try to quit smoking after years of use may sometimes develop depression, anxiety or irritability in the first few weeks and often go back to smoking.

- It's important to consult your doctor if you develop symptoms of depression or anxiety when you try to quit smoking.

SMOKING MARIJUANA

- Marijuana may cause depression, acute panic attacks or ongoing anxiety, even in people who have never previously shown signs of having the illness.
- There is no known 'safe' level of marijuana use.

THE HARMFUL EFFECTS OF AMPHETAMINES (SPEED), ECSTASY AND OTHER ILLEGAL DRUGS

Many people use illegal drugs to deal with their depression or anxiety but:

- the effects of these drugs may increase depression and anxiety
- a high proportion of people who use amphetamines and related drugs develop depression, anxiety, panic attacks and paranoia
- ecstasy and related drugs can cause severe mental and emotional disturbances
- there are growing concerns about damage to brain neurons from heavy use of amphetamines and ecstasy
- withdrawal effects of these drugs usually include depression, anxiety, irritability and agitation
- the feelings of depression experienced after use of amphetamines or ecstasy do not respond to antidepressant medication.

WHAT RESEARCH ON SUBSTANCE-USE IN AUSTRALIA TELLS US

- One in 13 Australian adults has a substance-use disorder.
- Alcohol-use disorders are about three times as common as other drug-use disorders.
- Of the illegal drugs, marijuana accounts for more drug-use disorders than any other drug.
- The majority of children under the age of 17 years have not taken illegal substances.
- Men are more than twice as likely as women to have a substance-use disorder (11 per cent compared with 4.5 per cent).
- The prevalence of substance-use disorders actually declines with age. For example, one in six Australians aged 18-24 years has a substance-use disorder compared with just one in 90 over 65 years of age.

¹ National Health and Medical Research Council (2009). *Australian guidelines to reduce health risks from drinking alcohol*. www.nhmrc.gov.au/publications

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- There is little difference between rates of substance-use disorders in rural and metropolitan areas.
- Australians from non-English speaking backgrounds are less likely to have a substance-use disorder.

HOW CAN YOU REDUCE YOUR ALCOHOL AND DRUG USE?

Part of reducing alcohol and other drug use is to be aware of how much alcohol you are drinking and what drugs you are taking. Recording this information in a diary can be a useful way to keep track of your intake. Once you know this, there are some ways to help yourself.

1. Stop completely

It's important to stop completely when:

- your depression or anxiety is severe
- you have suicidal thoughts
- you've experienced physical health problems as a result of your drinking or drug use
- you've become dependent on alcohol or another drug
- your life and happiness is affected
- you're taking antidepressants.

2. Moderate or control your use

It's often very hard to stop drinking or taking drugs completely. Asking your family and friends for help is a good place to start. Your doctor can also develop a program to help you to change your habits. If necessary your doctor may prescribe medication to help you stop drinking alcohol.

If you have developed drinking problems in association with depression or anxiety, it's important at least to control or moderate your drinking. A good way to reduce your alcohol or drug intake is to set your own personal goals on how you plan to cut back. This may include:

- how many alcohol-free days you will have each week (It is ideal to have at least two alcohol free days each week)
- how many standard drinks you will have on any one drinking day
- what your maximum number of standard drinks is per week.

If you are depressed and are drinking alcohol or taking other drugs, it is worth remembering you need to set out to address both problems. The two problems may relate closely to each other, but once your pattern of substance use is habitual, you will need to do something about it as well as the depression in order to make a full recovery.

WHAT ELSE CAN YOU DO?

- Don't drink alone.
- Don't drink when you know you're down or anxious.
- Don't keep alcohol in the house.
- Avoid situations where you know you will drink excessively (e.g. bars, pubs, hotels).
- Limit drinking to meal times.
- Drink low-alcohol beers and mixers.
- Alternate alcoholic drinks with non-alcoholic drinks.
- Don't drink during the working week.
- Have alcohol-free days, weekends or weeks.
- Count your drinks and stop at a pre-set limit e.g. two per day.
- Drink slowly – limit yourself to one drink per hour.

MORE INFORMATION

National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre

www.ndarc.med.unsw.edu.au or **02 9385 0333**

Information and research about drugs and alcohol in Australia.

Quitline

www.quitnow.info.au or **131 848**

This program can help you quit smoking or help you find out more about how smoking harms you.

National Cannabis Prevention and Information Centre

www.ncpic.org.au or **1800 30 40 50**

Evidence-based information on cannabis and related harms.

Australian Drug Information Network

www.adin.com.au

Central point of access to alcohol and drug information and services in Australia.

DrugInfo Clearinghouse

www.druginfo.adf.org.au or **1300 85 85 84**

Information about alcohol and other drugs, and drug prevention.

beyondblue: the national depression initiative

Info line 1300 22 4636 or infoline@beyondblue.org.au

www.beyondblue.org.au

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