

# ndss

National Diabetes Services Scheme

An Australian Government Initiative

# Alcohol and type 1 diabetes



NDSS Helpline 1800 637 700  
[ndss.com.au](http://ndss.com.au)

 **diabetes**  
australia

The NDSS is administered by Diabetes Australia

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The following information on alcohol should be used as a guide. Alcohol affects people differently and some of this information may not apply to all people with type 1 diabetes.

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Type 1 diabetes shouldn't stop you from going out, having fun and doing the things you enjoy. But if you choose to drink alcohol, it's important to know how it will affect your diabetes and overall health, and what you can do to stay as safe as possible when drinking.

Alcohol is the most commonly used recreational drug in Australia, available legally to anyone over the age of 18. It's actually classified as a 'depressant' drug which simply means that it slows down your body's response rates, which can lead to poor decision making and slower reflexes. Drinking alcohol can cause immediate problems with speaking and movement which can lead to harmful accidents or injuries, or unwanted physical or sexual violence.



When you become a teenager your body goes through a lot of changes. Just as your body keeps developing and maturing, so does your brain. There are a lot of ways alcohol can affect your health, including the health of your brain. Alcohol can affect your brain because it can actually stop it from developing normally. Alcohol affects the brains of young people differently from the way it affects adult's brains, and because of this it can cause health problems, memory problems, addiction or depression.

No amount of alcohol is completely safe to drink. If you have diabetes you can still choose to drink alcohol, but there are more risks. It's important for you to know about these risks so you can reduce them and avoid dangerous situations.

An illustration of a person with long, wavy hair drinking from a bottle. The person is shown in profile, facing right. The bottle is held in their right hand. The background behind the person is a green and yellow stippled area. To the right of the person, there is a large orange speech bubble with a tail pointing towards the person's mouth. The speech bubble contains the text "No amount of alcohol is completely safe to drink." Below the speech bubble, there are several vertical orange lines that look like drips or paint strokes. The overall style is graphic and illustrative.

No amount of alcohol is completely safe to drink.

# How much is safe to drink?

No amount of alcohol is completely safe to drink. The more alcohol you drink, the greater the risk. Research shows that people with diabetes can drink alcohol, but it's advisable that they stick to no more than 4 standard drinks in a day and no more than 10 standard drinks in a week. This is the same as the recommendation for all Australians. Most people with diabetes can safely drink alcohol in moderation, but it's always best to check with your doctor if you have any questions.

For young people under 18 years of age, not drinking alcohol is the safest option.

Excessive drinking or 'binge drinking' can be dangerous for your health. Short-term effects can include hangovers, headaches, nausea, vomiting, memory loss and injuries. There's also the risk of alcohol poisoning which can cause death. Other effects include changed behaviour such as aggression or depression. Long-term effects can include alcohol dependence which can lead to liver or brain damage over time.

You can lower your health risks and reduce the risk of dangerous situations by following these guidelines:

- » Adult men and women should drink no more than 10 standard drinks a week.
- » Drink no more than 4 standard drinks on any one day.

# One standard drink is equal to:



**285ml regular beer**



**425ml low alcohol beer**  
(less than 3% alcohol)



**Pre-mixed drink**



**100ml wine**



**60ml fortified wine**  
(port, sherry)



**30ml spirits**

It's important to be familiar with how much is in a standard drink of each type of alcohol as it's easy to misjudge the amount you have had to drink.

By Australian law, the label on every alcoholic drink must show how many standard drinks it contains.

It's important to remember that some drinks served at restaurants, bars, clubs, and particularly at parties, can have more alcohol than a standard drink. As an example, an average serving of wine at a restaurant is 150 ml making it 1.5 standard drinks. In addition, cocktails can contain many shots of different spirits. So, even though they may look like one standard drink, they can actually contain a whole lot more.





# How does alcohol affect everyone?

Because everyone is different, alcohol can have different effects on people depending on several things including:

- » gender
- » weight
- » amount of body fat
- » what they have eaten beforehand
- » physical activity
- » how they are feeling at the time.

For more information on the effects of alcohol go to the Australian Government's National Health and Medical Research Council's (NHMRC) guidelines: [nhmrc.gov.au/about-us/publications/australian-guidelines-reduce-health-risks-drinking-alcohol](https://www.nhmrc.gov.au/about-us/publications/australian-guidelines-reduce-health-risks-drinking-alcohol)



# How does alcohol affect a person with type 1 diabetes?

Drinking alcohol is risky for everyone. But people with type 1 diabetes face more risks when drinking alcohol than people without diabetes. Alcohol can affect your blood glucose levels (BGLs), which may cause hypoglycaemia (a 'hypo').

Your risk of a hypo is increased when you drink alcohol because your liver thinks it's a toxin that needs to be processed. Until the alcohol is completely processed, your liver will not release a sufficient amount of glucose into your blood which means your BGLs are lower, and this may lead to a hypo. Sometimes your BGLs are first raised by the sugar content in some alcoholic drinks (which are mixed with soft drink) but then they're lowered once your liver starts processing the alcohol. The risk of a hypo happening is possible both during the time you're drinking, as well as for many hours after drinking.

Symptoms of a hypo can include shaking, sweating, dizziness, headaches, crying, grumpiness, hunger and numbness or tingling around the lips, tongue or cheeks. So, it's very important to check your BGLs if you have any or all of those symptoms. If it's below 4 mmol/L you should have:

- » glucose tablets equivalent to 15 grams carbohydrate (carb) OR
- » 6–7 jellybeans OR
- » 1/2 can of regular soft drink (not 'diet') OR
- » 3 teaspoons sugar or honey OR
- » 1/2 glass of fruit juice.


For more information on how to treat a hypo, read or download NDSS fact sheet: [ndss.com.au/about-diabetes/resources/find-a-resource/managing-hypoglycaemia-fact-sheet](https://ndss.com.au/about-diabetes/resources/find-a-resource/managing-hypoglycaemia-fact-sheet)

# Alcohol and hypos

If you drink alcohol, you and your friends may not recognise the symptoms of a hypo because it may look like you're drunk. This is dangerous because you may not get the right help fast enough.

Young people with type 1 diabetes need to plan ahead if they're drinking. Tips to reduce your risk of alcohol-related hypos:

- » Never drink on an empty stomach. Make sure you always have some carbs in a meal or snack prior to drinking.
- » Check your BGLs just before going to bed to reduce the chances of having a hypo while sleeping.
- » Eat a carb snack before going to bed. Remember that the body continues to process alcohol even after drinking stops.
- » Never drink alone. Ask a friend, who knows you have diabetes, to watch out for you if you decide to drink. Make sure they know how to recognise when you're having a hypo and that they know how to help you to treat it.



If you drink alcohol, you and your friends may not recognise the symptoms of a hypo because it may look like you're drunk.



# What types of alcohol can I drink?

Different types of alcohol may have different effects on your body. While alcohol can lower your BGLs it's important to remember that many types of beverages also contain carbs which can raise your BGLs.

It's best to pace yourself and learn how your body responds to different types of alcohol. It's also recommended to talk to your diabetes doctor or diabetes nurse practitioner about how to dose your insulin for when you're drinking alcohol.

- » Learn the carb content of what you're drinking. Websites and apps such as Calorie King ([calorieking.com.au](http://calorieking.com.au)) can tell you what's in your drink. The more information you have, the easier it'll be to manage your BGLs.
- » Pre-mixed drinks often have higher sugar content and can initially raise BGLs, followed by a drop once the alcohol effect on the liver has kicked in.
- » Check your BGLs often to see how different types of alcoholic drinks affect your body.

# Peer pressure

Wanting to fit in and make friends can make you act in certain ways. Sometimes your friends might pressure you to do something you don't really want to do, making you feel uncomfortable or left out unless you join in.

If you're offered alcohol that you don't wish to drink, stand your ground. You have the right to say no. Resisting pressure can be hard at times, but you can do it. You should only do something if you want to, know how to do it safely and feel comfortable in doing so.

If you're finding it hard to work up the courage to say no to something, you should know that sticking up for what you believe in feels really good. People don't have to agree on everything, and if you can explain to people in a calm way why something isn't for you, more often than not, you'll gain their respect.

## When to say NO

It may be wise to drink less or avoid alcohol all together if you have:

- » BGLs outside of your target range
- » high blood pressure
- » high triglycerides (fat) levels
- » eye disease related to diabetes
- » nerve damage in the arms or legs.

Drinking alcohol can make all of these conditions a lot worse.

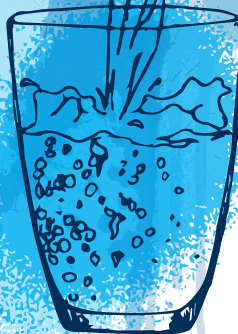
# Think when you drink: planning an evening out

- » Make sure to eat a meal with carbs before heading out. Avoid drinking on an empty stomach.
- » Carry extra carb snacks in case you have a hypo. This may include long-acting carbs (a muesli bar or 2–3 pieces of dried fruit) as well as fast-acting carbs (6–7 jellybeans or 1/2 can of soft drink).
- » Wear diabetes identification such as a medical alert bracelet.
- » Check your BGLs. Take along your blood glucose measurement kit even if you're using continuous or flash glucose monitoring and check levels frequently while you're out.
- » Pace yourself. Consider alternating one alcoholic drink with a glass of water. Binge drinking is never a good idea as your liver can't keep up with the large quantities of alcohol being drunk. This could result in vomiting and clouding of your judgement, so you won't be able to manage your diabetes properly.
- » Don't mix alcohol with illegal party drugs.
- » Never stop taking your insulin. Doing so could result in very high BGLs. This can lead to diabetic ketoacidosis (DKA) which is life-threatening.



# Before you go to bed

- » Check your BGLs and drink water to avoid waking up dehydrated the following day.
- » Set your alarm to wake you up a few hours later to check your BGLs. If possible, also ask a roommate, family member or partner to check up on you while you're sleeping.
- » Have hypo treatment within reach during the night.
- » Ask a roommate, family member or partner to wake you up in the morning so you can check your BGL, have your insulin and something to eat.





# Further resources

NDSS: Alcohol Fact Sheet

[ndss.com.au/about-diabetes/resources/find-a-resource/alcohol-fact-sheet](https://ndss.com.au/about-diabetes/resources/find-a-resource/alcohol-fact-sheet)

National Health and Medical Research Council's 2009 Australian Guidelines to Reduce Health Risks from Drinking Alcohol

[nhmrc.gov.au/about-us/publications/australian-guidelines-reduce-health-risks-drinking-alcohol](https://nhmrc.gov.au/about-us/publications/australian-guidelines-reduce-health-risks-drinking-alcohol)

Alcohol and Drug Foundation

[adin.com.au/content.asp?Document\\_ID=71#information](https://adin.com.au/content.asp?Document_ID=71#information)

Headspace: National Youth Mental Health Foundation

[headspace.org.au](https://headspace.org.au)

## References

- 1 National Health and Medical Research Council: 2020 Australian guidelines to reduce health risks from drinking alcohol: [nhmrc.gov.au/about-us/publications/australian-guidelines-reduce-health-risks-drinking-alcohol](https://nhmrc.gov.au/about-us/publications/australian-guidelines-reduce-health-risks-drinking-alcohol)

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