

Drinking too much?

Alcohol is consumed for many reasons – enjoyment, relaxation and sociability. While most people drink at levels that cause few adverse effects, research shows that many people living in rural and remote areas are more likely to drink at higher risk levels

New guidelines released by the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) during 2009 recommend alcohol consumption be limited to two drinks a day. These guidelines have sparked considerable debate amongst many in the community, providing a challenge to health professionals promoting the message of safe drinking.

The National Centre for Farmer Health's preliminary research shows more than half of Australian farmers drink more than six standard drinks in a single session at least once a month. When considering the new NHMRC guidelines, this is triple the recommended safe daily amount.

Farmers often drink for self-medication for pain and stress. Alcohol has muscle relaxant and sedating properties and may at times be used to assist in managing chronic pain.

Stresses associated with farming such as drought and unfavourable market conditions can also potentially result in higher levels of drinking amongst Australian primary producers.

Farmers health at risk

The National Centre for Farmer Health surveyed 1789 farmers between 2003–2009 in their nationwide Sustainable Farm Families (SFF) program, with results showing that 19 per cent of respondents who drink alcohol, do so at high-risk levels (binge drinking) at least once a week. These results are similar to those reported in city nightclubs.

While the short-term effects of drinking too much alcohol, such as nausea, vomiting, memory loss and injury, are well documented, the longer-term effects also need to be considered.

Alcohol consumption has been linked with a range of diseases that can cause death and adverse effects, reducing the quality of life. The adverse long-term effects of alcohol on health include cardiovascular disease, cancers, diabetes, nutrition-related conditions, obesity, risks to unborn babies, liver diseases, mental health conditions, tolerance, dependence, long-term cognitive impairment and self-harm.

Varying impacts

On average, women reach a given blood alcohol concentration (BAC) after consuming less alcohol but men tend to take more risks and experience more harmful effects. Consuming four drinks on a single occasion more than doubles the relative risk of an injury in the six hours afterwards, with the risk increasing more rapidly when more than four drinks are consumed in one session.

There is only a small difference between men and women in the risk of alcohol-related injury at low levels of drinking, but at higher levels the lifetime risk of alcohol-related disease increases more quickly for women, while the lifetime risk of alcohol-related injury increases more quickly for men.

Drinking less frequently, for example weekly rather than daily, and drinking less on each occasion will reduce the lifetime risk of alcohol-related harm.

The more alcohol consumed on a single occasion the more skills and inhibitions decrease and risky behaviour increases, resulting in a greater risk of injury during or immediately after the occasion.

The high-risk nature of farming combined with the effects of alcohol consumption mean farmers, their workers and families are potentially at higher risk of harm than others. It is illegal for people to drive or operate heavy machinery if they have been drinking alcohol and depending on the amount consumed, this is also the case for the next day.

Alcohol quick to take effect

Alcohol normally starts to affect the brain within five minutes. Blood Alcohol Concentrations (BAC) reach peak levels 30–45 minutes after one standard drink has been consumed. The liver has a relatively fixed rate of metabolism regardless of the number of drinks consumed, so the rapid consumption of alcoholic drinks results in a higher BAC.

Generally it takes about one hour for a person's body to eliminate one standard drink, but this can vary considerably from person to person.

Liver size, body mass and composition, alcohol tolerance and individual variation in the genes controlling the expression of alcohol-metabolising enzymes in the liver will all affect a person's metabolism rate. As such, there is no amount of alcohol that is safe for everyone to drink.

Binge drinking

Director of the National Centre for Farmer Health, Clinical Associate Professor Sue Brumby, believes the high drinking levels amongst farming communities are also linked to the 'drinking culture' at events such as bachelor and spinster balls and sporting clubs.

"In rural areas, historically some of the fundraising activities of sporting clubs revolve around alcohol sales and there is room for varied and new sponsorship for clubs to help address this. Indeed some sporting clubs are actively engaging with varied sponsors to help reduce the reliance," Sue said.

Research shows that binge drinking is more common amongst rural farming communities than the general public.

"Our SFF survey showed, of the 84% of respondents who drank at high levels, 54% reported drinking at high levels at least once a month. Heavy drinking (binge drinking) is often associated with younger generations, but the age of respondents in our SFF survey ranged from 19–74 years, with the average age for men being 48 years and for women 47 years."

What's a standard drink?

A standard drink size varies between countries, but in Australia a standard drink is defined as containing 10 grams of alcohol (12.5 millilitres of pure alcohol).

Alcohol servings are often larger than the standard drink size, so be aware when ordering drinks. In Australia all take-away alcoholic beverages sold – bottles, cans and casks, are required by law to state the approximate number of standard drinks they contain on the label. Table 1 gives a guide to the number of standard drinks in alcoholic beverages.

TABLE 1 Number of Australian standard drinks in common alcoholic beverages

Alcoholic beverage	Number of standard drinks
Low-strength beer (2.7% alcohol)	
1 can or stubbie	0.8
285ml glass	0.6
425ml glass	0.9
Slab of 24 x 375ml cans or stubbies	19
Mid-strength beer (3.5% alcohol)	
1 can or stubbie	1
285ml glass	0.8
425ml glass	1.2
Slab of 24 x 375ml cans or stubbies	24
Full-strength beer (4.9% alcohol)*	
1 can or stubbie	1.4
285ml glass	1.1
425ml glass	1.6
Slab of 24 x 375ml cans or stubbies	34
Wine (9.5–13% alcohol)	
100ml glass	1
Average restaurant serving (150ml)	1.4–1.6
750ml bottle	7–8
4L cask	36–43
Spirits (37–40%)	
1 nip (30ml)	1
700ml bottle	22
Pre-mixed spirits (5–7%)	
1 can (375ml)	1.5–2.1
1 bottle (275ml)	1.1–1.5

Source: National Health and Medical Research Council
*Includes diet beer

At a glance

National Health and Medical Research Council guidelines recommend drinking no more than two standard drinks a day to reduce the lifetime risk of harm from alcohol-related disease or injury.

Research shows more than half of Australian farmers drink more than six standard drinks in a single session at least once a month – triple the recommended safe daily amount.

It has been suggested the high drinking levels amongst farming communities are linked to the drinking culture at events such as bachelor and spinster balls and sporting clubs.

National Health and Medical Research Council guidelines

Guideline 1: Reducing the risk of alcohol-related harm over a lifetime.

The lifetime risk of harm from drinking alcohol increases with the amount consumed.

For healthy men and women, drinking no more than two standard drinks on any day reduces the lifetime risk of harm from alcohol-related disease or injury.

Guideline 2: Reducing the risk of injury on a single occasion of drinking¹.

On a single occasion of drinking, the risk of alcohol-related injury increases with the amount consumed.

For healthy men and women, drinking no more than four standard drinks on a single occasion reduces the risk of alcohol-related injury arising from that occasion.

¹ A single occasion of drinking refers to a sequence of drinks taken without the blood alcohol concentration reaching zero in between.



In moderation: For healthy men and women, drinking no more than two standard drinks on any day reduces the lifetime risk of harm from alcohol-related disease or injury.

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Toni Nugent

KONIGININ GROUP



Dry July – a challenge

Case study

Farm information

Farmer
Kit Leake

Location
Kellerberrin,
Western Australia

Property size
3200ha

Enterprises
Cropping (wheat, barley, canola,
lupins, brown manure)



Like many farmers, Kit Leake, Kellerberrin, Western Australia enjoys a drink or two at the end of the day. So when Kit set himself the challenge and signed up to *Dry July*, he wasn't sure how he would go not drinking alcohol for a whole month.

"I enjoy a drink and typically drink about three standard drinks a day and about two times a week I might drink up to eight drinks," Kit said.

More about *Dry July*

With its inaugural year 2008 and with more than 1000 participants, *Dry July* raised \$257,283 for the Prince of Wales Hospital Foundation and Dreams2Live4 Committee in Sydney, New South Wales.

Dry July is an online social community where people can sign up to the challenge of not drinking alcohol for a month. Participants are sponsored via their profile pages online, with all funds raised going towards benefiting the lives of adults living with cancer across Australia.

"I support the fundraiser — raising money to help adults living with cancer, but the main reason I signed onto *Dry July* was to challenge myself. Our neighbour had also fought breast cancer during the previous year, having treatment at the Sir Charles Gairdner Hospital in Perth, the WA beneficiary of *Dry July* for 2010. They were one of my first sponsors when I started the challenge."

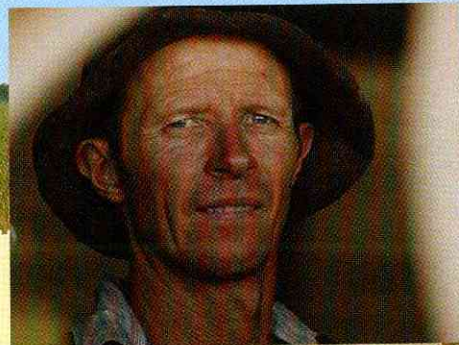
Kit first heard about *Dry July* during 2009 while listening to the ABC Radio. The presenter Geoff Hutchinson was participating in *Dry July* and although Kit initially thought Geoff was a little crazy, thinking it would be tough going without alcohol for a month, he continued to think about *Dry July* throughout the remainder of the year. Four days before July this year Kit signed up to the challenge and as they say 'the rest is history'.

Kit topped the state of WA raising a total of \$6342.00 and was 8th in the national fundraising rankings.

"I worked out I could ramp up my fundraising efforts and aimed to be the leading state participant by revving up the community and

During 2009 *Dry July* became a national campaign with more than 4000 participants across Australia raising a total of \$1.27 million dollars for adult cancer patients at six beneficiary hospitals. This year's *Dry July* saw a national total of \$2.3 million raised.

Dry July challenges people to clear their head, get healthy, encourages positive change and a healthy attitude towards alcohol consumption.




Making a change: Kit Leake rose to the challenge of *Dry July* and now has the confidence to enjoy at least two alcohol-free nights per week.

putting the challenge out there for the country guy to beat the high-profile Australian Rules Football legend Graham Moss. Graham accepted the challenge and we had a lot of laughs during the month raising money for a great cause. On the whole I received fantastic support from both the local community and others across the state."

Four days into *Dry July* Kit received the sad news that his mother had been diagnosed with lung cancer.

"I think it's kind of quirky how things happen. Mum will also probably end up having treatment in Perth so that makes my fundraising efforts even more important."

While Kit has not noticed any direct health benefits from giving up alcohol for a month, he believes the main benefit for him is to realise he can go without drinking alcohol every day.

"I couldn't remember the last time I had an alcohol-free day before starting *Dry July*, so I considered it was going to be a fair challenge for me. But easily completing *Dry July* has given me more confidence to achieve my goals. I have also replaced one of 37 years of my wife, Eileen being my designated driver," Kit said. 

CHECK OUT ▶ Kit's *Dry July* profile at:
 www.dryjuly.com/profiles/kitleake