

Survey shows binge drinking is a farm health issue

Ground Cover continues its examination of farmer health issues. This report looks at the influence of alcohol on farm health and safety

By Melissa Marino

■ When the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) released guidelines last year recommending alcohol consumption be limited to two standard drinks a day there was vigorous debate in both professional and general community circles.

For some it was just ‘wowsers’; for others it was considered a wake-up call for Australian drinkers.

Either way, it brought into focus the National Centre for Farmer Health data that shows more than half of Australian farmers drink more than six standard drinks in a single session at least once a month. This is more than triple the daily amount nominated by the NHMRC as safe, and a third more than the maximum it recommends people drink on any one occasion.

The figures, based on preliminary self-reported information from 2003 to 2009 provided by 1789 participants in the centre’s nationwide Sustainable Farm Families (SFF) program, also show 19 per cent of respondents who drink alcohol are drinking at these high-risk levels at least weekly. The NHMRC recommends no more than four standard drinks on a single occasion, in particular to reduce the risk of alcohol-related injury.

The centre’s director, Associate Professor Sue Brumby, says the SFF data shows that a high percentage of farming men and women engage in short-term, risky drinking ... similar to what is reported in metropolitan nightclubs. (Risky drinking is classified by the NHMRC as more than two standard drinks per day or more than four standard drinks on any one occasion.)

Alcohol-related health risks are both common and well documented and include long-term effects in the form of chronic disease, depression and obesity, and immediate risks such as injury from road accidents and domestic violence.

When these effects of alcohol consumption

KEY POINTS

- Research suggests more farmers are drinking alcohol at risky levels
- Alcohol often a form of self-medication
- Possible links between alcohol and farm accidents

are considered alongside the nature of agricultural work, farmers, their families and staff could be at a higher risk of harm compared with the general public.

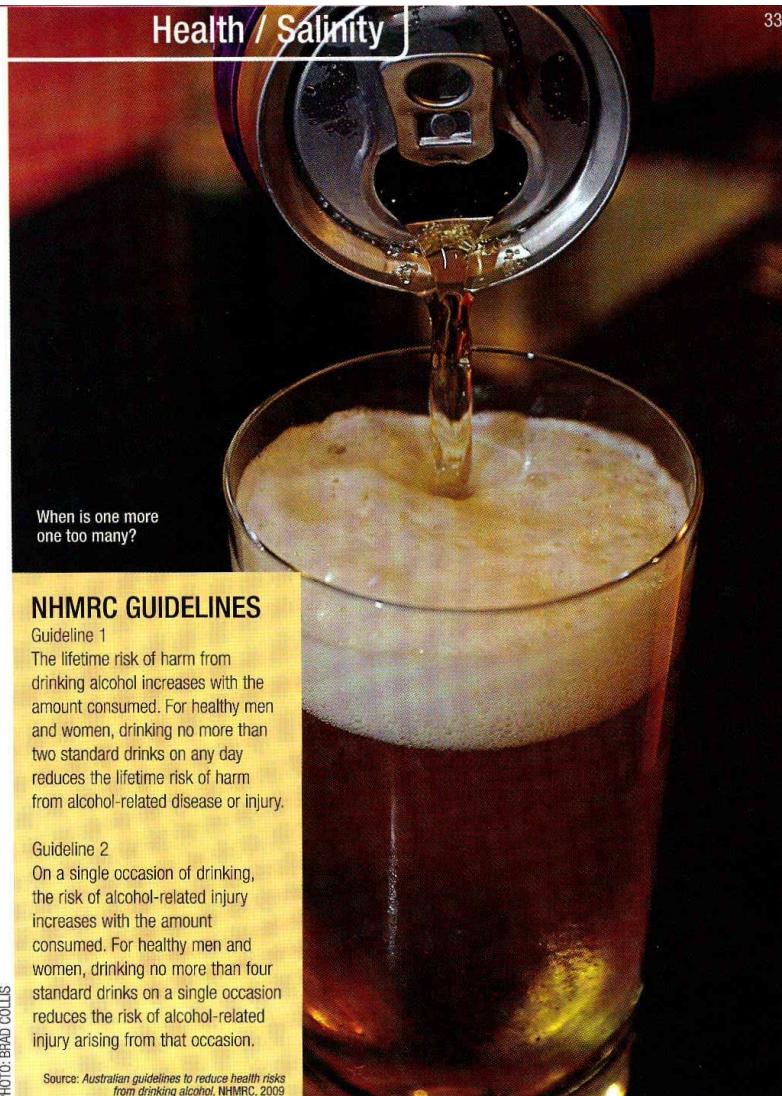
“Alcohol can affect performance at work even the next day and farmers are often using dangerous or large machinery,” Associate Professor Brumby says. “So you have to consider the effects of alcohol when thinking about farm safety and protecting yourself and others against injury.”

Associate Professor Brumby attributes the reported high drinking levels to alcohol being part of an accepted culture within social structures such as sporting clubs and B&S balls. This is reinforced by advertising, which often associates alcohol with agriculture, the outdoors and hard work.

This is reflected in the fact that, of the 87 per cent of participants in the SFF program who consume alcohol, 51 per cent drink at risky levels over the course of a month and 19 per cent drink at risky levels weekly.

Almost two-thirds (64 per cent) of male drinkers and more than one-third (34 per cent) of female drinkers were consuming alcohol at risky levels each month – higher than in the general population, where less than half (48 per cent) of male drinkers and 30 per cent of women drank at those levels (*Alcohol consumption in Australia 2004–05*, Australian Bureau of Statistics).

It is, says Associate Professor Brumby, short-term high-risk ‘binge’ drinking that would normally be associated with young people, but the SFF respondents’ ages



Health / Safety

When is one more one too many?

NHMRC GUIDELINES

Guideline 1

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

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.

Source: *Australian guidelines to reduce health risks from drinking alcohol*, NHMRC, 2009

PHOTO: BRAD COLLIS

range from 19 to 74, with an average of 48 years for men and 47 for women.

Traditionally, she says, farmers have self-medicated with alcohol for chronic pain or stress. In recent times drought may have exacerbated alcohol use either as a result of stress or simply in the process of talking through issues over a few, and then a few more, drinks.

Because alcohol misuse is both a health and cultural issue, it needs to be tackled on several fronts, Associate Professor Brumby says.

The National Centre for Farmer Health is a partnership between Hamilton’s Western District Health Service and Deakin University. It is currently working with rural health professionals involved with families and agricultural workers to discuss alcohol use, recognise where it may be too high and to look at ways of modifying behaviour.

Meanwhile, the SFF program provides an opportunity to give people direct information and consider how alcohol

can affect their health, wellbeing and safety. Simply drawing people’s attention to the calorie count in alcohol can have an impact, Associate Professor Brumby says. “When we discuss diet and nutrition we also talk about alcohol,” she says.

The centre recommends people follow the NHMRC guidelines (see box) and aim for at least three alcohol-free days per week.

While some have felt the guidelines are too restrictive, Associate Professor Brumby says they provide clear advice on achieving better health. “What the NHMRC is telling us very clearly is what we’ve been drinking is, in terms of health outcomes, not good,” she says. □

This project is supported through the Farming and Fishing Health and Safety Collaborative Partnership of which the GRDC is a member.

GRDC Research Code RDC00004
 More information: www.grdc.com.au/rdc00004