

## Policy: Upper limits for responsible drinking

### ALAC'S POLICY

ALAC has developed a set of suggested 'safer drinking levels' for both men and women. This is a general guide, to help people establish whether they are drinking safely in a given situation.

In any one week, drink no more than:	On any one drinking occasion, drink no more than:	If drinking every day, drink no more than:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 21 standard drinks for men</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 6 standard drinks for men</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 3 standard drinks for men</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 14 standard drinks for women</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 4 standard drinks for women</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 2 standard drinks for women</li> </ul>

These upper limits are just a general guideline, so even if people drink less than these limits, their drinking will not be safe in all situations. Everybody is different, and what is safe for one person may not be safe for someone else. For some people, 'safe drinking' means no alcoholic drinks at all, for example, pregnant women.

As well as keeping within these recommended upper limits and following the exceptions outlined below, people can make drinking even safer by including some alcohol free days.

### Introduction

The effect of alcohol consumption on various individuals is complex and varied. What is safe for one person is not necessarily safe for another.

The effect of alcohol on the body depends on factors such as gender, genetics, previous alcohol history, nutrition and interacting illness. The pattern and circumstances of consumption are other complicating factors.

It is difficult therefore, to define a level of consumption which is 'safe' for all people under all circumstances. In some circumstances and for some people, safer drinking will mean drinking no alcohol at all.

While this means providing guidelines for safe drinking is difficult, ALAC believes it is still important to give some level of guidance, even though it may not be appropriate all of the time.

Generally people are unaware of the importance of measuring and monitoring their consumption. Most people are aware of the cognitive and behavioural consequences of drinking, that can lead to accidents, injury, relationship issues, etc. However they generally don't know how much alcohol, how often, puts them at risk of longer-term physiological consequences such as organ damage and dependency.

### Background

In 1994, ALAC set up an expert group, representing alcohol producers, health promoters, problem prevention and treatment workers, to

review existing guidelines and establish a set of upper limits for responsible drinking. The group agreed to upper limits of **21 standard drinks a week for men** and **14 standard drinks a week for women**. On any one occasion, **men should not exceed 6 standard drinks**, and **women should not exceed 4 standard drinks**. It was also agreed that **regular alcohol-free days** be recommended.<sup>1</sup>

Early in 2002, after the Australian Health and Medical Research Council reviewed Australian limits<sup>2</sup>, ALAC reviewed its own and confirmed them. However, in recognition of the number of people who do drink most days, a further recommendation for those people was added. So for this group, ALAC advises that **men who drink every day should not exceed 3 standard drinks**, and **women who drink every day should not exceed 2 standard drinks**. ALAC reiterates its recommendation that people have **regular alcohol-free days**.

A standard drink contains 10g of pure alcohol, which roughly equates to one measure of spirits or fortified wine, one average-sized glass of table wine (100ml), or a 250ml glass of beer.

An extensive list of caveats applies to these guidelines. It is important to consider not drinking when driving, operating machinery, during pregnancy, when taking certain medication, when very tired or depressed. Further caveats include the fact that both gender and size have an influence on how much you can safely drink and whether there is a family history of alcohol and other drug misuse or abuse. Finally, it is important to consume food whenever you are

drinking, as this slows down the rate of alcohol absorption into the body.

## Key issues

- The 1996/97 New Zealand Health Survey reports that 17.3% of adults show a drinking pattern that puts them at risk of future physical or mental health effects from alcohol. Younger people and men were more likely to indicate risky drinking patterns than women or older people.<sup>3</sup>
- Only a small proportion of people who experience alcohol-related problems contact a specialist service. Most manage, or attempt to manage, these problems by themselves and/or with the help of family and friends. The promulgation of these guidelines may help them to cut down without needing professional intervention.
- There are risks inherent in promoting upper limits. Some people may see the maximum amounts as a recommendation that they drink more than they are currently drinking, or to that level. Care must therefore be taken with how these guidelines are promoted.
- A proportion of the population will always choose not to consume any alcohol at all. This is an important and valid choice. Promoting responsible upper limits must in no way undermine this.

## Conclusion

Drinkers need information in order to make responsible decisions about their alcohol consumption. One element of this relates to how much is too much. While there can be no definitive statement on what level is safe, ALAC believes it is important to provide guidance on upper limits for responsible drinking.

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## References and further reading

1. MacEwan I, Alcohol Advisory Council of New Zealand. 1995. *Upper Limits For Responsible Drinking: Report of the Working Party on Upper Limits for Responsible Drinking*. Wellington: Alcohol Advisory Council of New Zealand.
  2. NHMRC. 2001. *Australian Alcohol Guidelines: Health Risks and Benefits*. Canberra: National Health & Medical Research Council.
  3. MOH. 1999. *Taking the Pulse: The 1996/97 New Zealand Health Survey*. Wellington: Ministry of Health.
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## Further Information

ALAC has produced a range of booklets to help those who are concerned about their own drinking or the drinking of others. The titles are: *Is Your Drinking OK?; Cutting Down; Stopping Drinking; Maintaining the Change; Concerned About Someone's Drinking; Helping Problem Drinkers*. All of these booklets can be ordered from your ALAC regional office (phone 0508 258258).

If you are concerned about your drinking or the drinking of someone close to you, you may wish to contact the Alcohol Helpline on 0800 787 797. The Alcohol Helpline is a confidential information, advice and referral service for people with questions about their own or someone else's drinking. It is a free, nation-wide service. Lines are open from 10am to 10pm daily.

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## About ALAC

The Alcohol Advisory Council of New Zealand – Kaunihera Whakatupato Waipiro ō Aotearoa (ALAC) was established under and is governed by the Alcohol Advisory Council Act 1976. Since 1992, ALAC has operated as a Crown Entity under the Public Finance Act 1989.

ALAC is funded by a fixed levy on all alcohol produced for consumption in New Zealand, which ensures that funds are targeted at alcohol-related problems. This reflects the Government's desire to both address the consequences of alcohol misuse and promote safe drinking habits.

ALAC's primary objective is the encouragement and promotion of moderation in the use of alcohol, the discouragement and reduction of the misuse of alcohol, and the minimisation of the personal, social, and economic harm resulting from the misuse of alcohol.

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## Further information available from ALAC

An electronic copy of this and other ALAC policy statements are available on ALAC's website: [www.alcohol.org](http://www.alcohol.org).

