



ALCOHOL-RELATED INJURIES ARE ON THE RISE, PARTICULARLY IN YOUNG WOMEN.  
BY Clair Weaver

# FACT: THIS YEAR 65,000 OF US WILL BE HOSPITALISED FROM ALCOHOL RELATED INJURIES

**C**an you imagine settling down for a dvd night with your girlfriends over a crack pipe? Or shooting up with your boss after work on a Friday? How about popping some pills with your roast chicken at your mother-in-law's Sunday lunch?

These scenarios are absurd. Yet we don't blink at the thought of drinking – which causes far more injuries and deaths than any other drug – at any social occasion.

Sure, most of us assume we have our alcohol consumption under control. It's not like it's crystal meth or anything. And a few glasses of wine even have health benefits, right?

While you're putting on your sparkly new outfit and heels before heading out on the town, no-one expects to end their night soaked in blood in an emergency department. Yet 65,000 of us will be hospitalised and another 3500 will die from drinking too much in Australia this year, according to the Alcohol Education and Rehabilitation Foundation (AER).

And in a worrying cultural turnaround, young women are now more likely to end

up in hospital because of alcohol than their male counterparts.

The ugly side to our drinking culture – witnessed every day by jaded emergency workers – includes fights, glassings, alcohol poisoning, attempted suicides, drownings and car accidents.

New research, commissioned by the AER, has found that 80 per cent of alcohol-related injuries in hospitals are considered serious or life-threatening.

## HEADING FOR A FALL

A third of these injuries are caused by falls, which may sound trivial but can mean cracking your head on the pavement or falling off a balcony. Many are left with brain damage, permanent scarring or in a wheelchair because drinking got out of control.

The AER study – which is the largest of its kind and involved 6396 people admitted to six hospitals in New South Wales – found that one in six patients had been drinking before they were injured.

But Professor Ian Webster, director of the AER, warns that the national picture is much

worse, as most of the hospitals in the study treat a high number of migrant populations, who drink substantially less than Australians.

The real figure is likely to be between 25 and 30 per cent, he says, and about 33 per cent in hospitals located near popular inner-city drinking strips.

Data from the National Drug Research Institute shows that the Northern Territory has the highest rate of alcohol-attributable hospitalisations, at more than double the national average. Queensland and New South Wales residents are also significantly more likely to end up in hospital from drinking. And while they may not have the highest rates, Victoria, Tasmania and the Australian Capital Territory have recorded increases in recent years.

Meanwhile, for the first time in history, women have become a problem group. "The overall rate of alcohol-related injuries has stayed roughly about the same over the past 10 years, but it's increasing in young women enormously," Professor Webster says.

Research published in the Australian And New Zealand Journal Of Public Health in

**DID YOU KNOW?** The rate of 18- to 24-year-old women being admitted to hospital because of alcohol has gone from six to 14.6 per 10,000 people in the last decade. \*Source: Victorian Admitted Episodes Dataset, Victorian Department of Human Services

2008 found the rate of young women taken to Victorian emergency departments because of alcohol has more than doubled within the past decade – surpassing even their male counterparts. Doctors have reported similar trends nationwide.

Most of those admitted to hospital need treatment for acute intoxication or alcohol dependence, but there's also a worrying inclination towards violence.

"Women are more prepared to fight once they've been drinking," says Dr Gordian Fulde, head of St Vincent's Hospital's emergency department in Sydney. "We've become a much more aggressive society and young women especially consider it a rite of passage to get drunk well before their 18th birthday."

Drinking in a licensed venue such as a bar, pub or club doubles your chance of getting hurt and ending up in hospital, according to the AER study.

Quantity is also important. Men who drink more than six standard drinks are 50 per cent more likely to be injured, while women who consume more than three face a 60 per cent increased risk.

### DRUNKEN ATTACKS

And it's not just drinkers themselves getting hurt, but innocent bystanders who find themselves in the wrong place at the wrong time, such as pedestrians ploughed down by a drunk driver. Ten per cent of injuries were carried out intentionally, with 7.1 per cent caused by another person, the research found.

Dr Fulde says he has noticed a disturbing change in the nature of drunken assaults over the past decade. "One thing that definitely is a trend is that we have become a lot more violent. Long ago, if someone went down from a punch, [the fighting] would stop. What happens now is when someone is down on the ground, it doesn't stop. People stomp on heads and kick. We see some really horrible injuries."

Yet there have been improvements. Glassings – where someone attacks a victim in the face with a glass or bottle – are still a problem, but are on the decline. This follows the introduction of plastic

cups after midnight at licensed venues that have been identified as "trouble spots".

Alcohol causes far more harm than amphetamines such as crystal meth, which are often more recognised as a problem by the general public, says Professor Webster.

Dr Fulde agrees: "The drug issue is just miniscule compared to alcohol."

A large part of the problem is that alcohol is such an acceptable and integral part of our culture. How do we celebrate Australia Day or mark our birthdays? Not drinking is almost "un-Australian".

So with alcohol playing such an important role in our lives, is there really anything meaningful that can be done to tackle the \$15 billion a year problem?

### TAKING CONTROL

"We've done it with smoking," says Dr Fulde. "You can't go to a restaurant and have a smoke. It comes down to society; we've got to want to change." Professor Webster acknowledges the daunting scale of his mission but believes there are solutions. Making drinking more expensive by increasing alcohol tax – a tactic employed in the tobacco war – is his first answer.

Next is tightening control on the availability of alcohol. This means reducing the hours of alcohol sales, the number of places serving it and the density of outlets in one area. Promotions such as happy hours, which encourage excessive drinking, could be banned.

Thirdly, Professor Webster says, we need to change the environment of drinking in Australia. "We need to make places where you can eat, where families can go and it's not just men drinking, which can be the case at sports clubs," he says.

Another major challenge is tackling the insidious marketing of alcohol. Research by Professor Sandra Jones, of the University of Wollongong, found many young people exposed to alcohol advertising believe "alcohol is required to have a good time".

If this cycle isn't broken, drinking patterns and injury rates are unlikely to change. "Today's binge drinkers are tomorrow's role models," says Dr Fulde.

### HOW TO STAY SAFE ON A NIGHT OUT

**1** To cut the risk of suffering an alcohol-related injury on a night out, drink no more than four standard drinks. Any more and statistically, you are far more susceptible to harm.

**2** If you want to lower your chances of ever being hurt because of alcohol in your lifetime, have no more than two drinks at a time.

**3** Set limits with alcohol, such as rotating with non-alcoholic drinks or having dedicated alcohol-free days.

**4** If you're having a party, offer non-alcohol alternatives, light beer and enough food to avoid the event being marred by injuries.

**5** Appoint a non-drinking driver or take public

transport if you intend to drink on a night out.

**6** Many wine glasses hold up to three standard drinks. Keep track of how big your glasses are.

**7** Don't get into a boat if the person in charge has been drinking. Alcohol is the cause of almost a quarter of boating deaths.

**8** Don't swim in the sea or even pools when drinking. Many injuries and deaths occur when alcohol is mixed with water activity.

**9** Parents shouldn't consume more than one drink per hour if they are responsible for supervising children who are swimming.

**10** Remember, it's illegal to serve alcohol to anyone under the age of 18.

