

## **ALCOHOL HARMS YOU!**

### **Drinking Advice to the General Public**

**In recent years, more and more Hong Kong people have begun to use alcohol as a way to socialise and relax. The Department of Health wants you to know about the alcohol-related health risks, so you can make an informed choice of drinking or not. For people who choose to drink, it is important to control their drinking and know their limits.**

#### **What is alcohol?**

- Ethanol (alcohol) is the chemical in alcoholic beverages that gives a pleasant or intoxicating feeling.
- Even in small quantities, alcohol drinks could affect your body at once. The immediate physiological responses to alcohol depend on the level of the alcohol in one's system.
- The ability to metabolise alcohol differs based on factors such as gender, age, ethnicity and body size. The speed of drinking and the amount of food in the stomach while drinking also affect the rate of absorbing alcohol by the body.

#### **What are the immediate effects of drinking? How many drinks are too much?**

- For some people, even a single drink can lead to a blood alcohol level exceeding the legal limit allowed for drivers in Hong Kong.
- Just few servings of alcohol over a short period of time can put some people into 'sloppy drunkenness' with classical symptoms such as slurred speech, unsteady walking, headache and nausea.
- Rapidly consuming 4 drinks can render drinkers confused, drowsy and vomiting.
- Drinkers of average build who quickly consume even larger quantities of alcohol (10 drinks/hr for men and 7 drinks/ hr for women) can be 'out cold', on which drinkers would experience unconsciousness, impaired breathing, low body temperature and be at risk for falling into coma<sup>1, 2</sup>.
- A lethal blood alcohol level (400 ml/dL) can result from a fast consumption of more than 8 drinks for a 115 pound person or 12 drinks in a 160 pound person<sup>1, 2</sup>. Each person has a different threshold, so stay within your limits.

#### **Even moderate drinking can cause long term harms - and its benefits are not proven.**

- International research shows that drinking even 1 drink per day increases your risk of dying from oral-pharyngeal cancer by 42%, laryngeal cancer by 21%, liver

- cancer by 10%<sup>3</sup>. These odds increase with the amount you drink.
- For men, drinking 2 drinks per day increases the risk of having a haemorrhagic stroke by 23% and death due to liver cirrhosis by 59%.
- For women, even 1 drink per day increases risk of death due to breast cancer by 13% and more than doubles the risk of dying from liver cirrhosis<sup>3</sup>.
- Heavy drinking of more than 3 drinks a day can even cause vision impairment at a younger age.
- Unlike in other parts of the world, researches on Hong Kong adults have not shown any cardiovascular benefits of moderate drinking<sup>4</sup>, and, even worse, there is evidence that moderate drinking can increase the risk of death from ischaemic heart disease among the elderly<sup>5</sup>. No benefits of moderate drinking have been demonstrated in the Chinese populations. Although moderate drinking seems to exhibit beneficial effects for the heart selectively among the Western populations, regular exercise and not smoking can also achieve similar benefits.
- In addition to long-term physiological effects, drinking also greatly increases other risks such as child neglect and abuse, low productivity or absenteeism in workplace, road traffic accidents, and injuries from aggression or domestic violence. Depression and suicidal thoughts are also strongly linked to drinking. The potential harms of alcohol greatly outweigh the benefits.

### What is an 'alcohol unit'?

- Different alcoholic beverages contain different levels of alcohol content. The amount of pure alcohol consumed depends on the amount and the alcohol by volume content.
- An 'alcohol unit' is a common measure of alcohol content, with which you can use to help monitor the amount you drink.
- There are no uniform international standard of an 'alcohol unit' but most countries use 10g as a unit of alcohol.
- In Hong Kong, 10g of alcohol is equivalent to 3/4 regular can of beer (250 ml) or about 1/2 a glass of wine (100 ml) or a pub measure of hard liquor (30 ml).
- A general rule of thumb to help you keep track of your drinking levels is that a typical serving size of beer (1 can), a typical serving size of wine (1 serving glass) in restaurants and most servings of mixed drinks will contain about 12g of alcohol.

Click [here](#) for more information of the number of 'alcohol unit' in different beverages.

### **Advice for women who are pregnant, planning for pregnancy and breastfeeding:**

- Your safest choice is not to drink alcohol at all
- Alcohol affects the well-being of your unborn child, causing significant and permanent birth defects, growth impairment, developmental problems and fetal alcohol syndrome.
- Drinking is not recommended if you are breastfeeding because alcohol disrupts milk supply. More importantly, alcohol can pass through breast milk and impair your child's psychomotor development and behaviour.
- If you are breastfeeding but choose to consume alcohol on special occasions, you must be cautioned to drink only after nursing your baby and only in small amounts. Breastfeeding should be avoided when drinking and for two hours after a single unit of alcohol.

### **If you drink, don't drive! Even one drink can put you over the legal limit.**

- In an average person, alcohol is metabolised at a rate of about 1 drink per hour. For a 120 pound person, even 1 drink can lead to a blood alcohol level exceeding the legal limit. It is not necessary for drinkers to feel or appear drunk or have classical symptoms of drunkenness to exceed the legal blood alcohol limit permitted in Hong Kong. If you drive, your safest option is not to drink at all.
- In Hong Kong, drivers can be randomly screened for a roadway breath test. The more a driver exceeds the legal limit, the higher the penalties incurred. Drink-driving offenders can be subject to a criminal record, license revocation and fines up to \$25,000. Offenders may also incur financial loss from accidents, litigation fees as well as higher insurance premiums.
- If you will be drinking or spending time with drinkers, plan ahead. People planning to attend occasions where drinks will be available should take priority in arranging safe transport home. Even if you don't drink, you should refuse rides offered by drivers who have used alcohol.

### **Some need to be extra careful with their drinking and abstain from drinking.**

In addition to pregnant women and people operating vehicles or heavy machinery, you should not drink if you are:

- Taking medicine or other drugs that interact with alcohol such as sleeping pills;
- Doing any kind of high-risk physical activity;
- Before or when engaging in activities that require attention, skill and coordination; and

- Living with mental or physical health problems.

### **Tips on reducing the drinking-related risks for drinkers:**

In Hong Kong, drinking is often part of business meetings and festivities such as wedding banquets. For people whose work or social life involves drinking, there are simple ways to reduce risks associated with alcohol consumption for yourself and those around you.

- Set limits for yourself and stick to them.
- Understand what a 'alcohol unit' is and the harms caused by different levels of alcohol intake so that you can monitor your intake.
- Start with non-alcoholic drinks and alternate alcoholic drinks with non-alcoholic ones.
- Choose drinks with lower alcohol content.
- Eat before or while you are drinking.
- Stop drinking as soon as you experience any adverse symptoms such as nausea.
- Avoid peer pressure and drinking games lest you drink more than you intend to.
- Do not let alcohol take over you - avoid embarrassment from misbehaviours.
- Do not let other friends embarrass themselves by drinking.

### **Get help early, if you think that you may have a drinking problem.**

Alcohol is addictive, and regular drinkers can sometimes lapse into problem drinking. In Hong Kong, it is not uncommon for drinkers to handle their problem drinking by themselves rather than seeking professional help. For those who suffer from drinking problem, scientific evidence shows that getting help early will improve the success rate of overcoming these problems. Early intervention is beneficial to health.

Click [here](#) for treatment programmes and support services for people with drinking problems.

### **Reference**

1. Alcohol Advisory Council of New Zealand. Blood alcohol levels. Retrieved from: <http://alcohol.org.nz/alcohol-its-effects/about-alcohol/blood-alcohol-levels>
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4. Schooling CM, Wenjie S, Ho SY et al. (2008). Moderate Alcohol Use and Mortality from Ischaemic Heart Disease: A Prospective Study in Older Chinese People. *PLoS ONE*, 3(6): e2370.

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