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EVERYONE CAN BE A LIFESAVER



Royal Life Saving

ROYAL LIFE SAVING SOCIETY - AUSTRALIA

FACT SHEET No.22

# Alcohol & Water Safety

## Q. Is the combination of alcohol consumption and aquatic activity an issue?

**A.** Alcohol is a contributing factor in at least 20% of all adult drowning deaths every year. In the 15-29 years age group, this rises to 41%. These figures are likely to be higher as only some drowning deaths are tested for the involvement of alcohol.

## Q. Why is alcohol consumption a factor in so many drowning deaths?

**A. Impaired Judgement** – Alcohol distorts your perception of risk, and your own abilities. With less accurate information pouring into the brain, you're not as well equipped to make the right decisions and more likely to get into trouble.

**Greater Risk Taking Behaviour** – The influence of alcohol removes inhibitions, leaving you more likely to take greater risks, even life threatening ones.

**Lack of Coordination** – Alcohol numbs the senses, particularly sight, sound and touch. When these senses fail, the stumbles and stutters kick in. Once alcohol has been consumed it can be hard to get out of trouble.

**Impaired Reaction Time** – As a depressant, alcohol reduces the rate the brain processes information. Ordinary reactions simply take longer. On the water, a quick response is vital for survival.

**Reduced Effectiveness of CPR** – Should you need rescuing, the consumption of alcohol reduces your chances of surviving a near drowning as resuscitation methods are less likely to work.

## Q. What activities were undertaken when these drowning deaths occurred?

**A.** People have drowned while intoxicated and involved in almost any type of aquatic activity including swimming, surfing, boating, rock fishing, sailing, walking beside the water and playing in the water.

## Q. What happens to my body when I consume alcohol and engage in aquatic activity?

**A.** There are a range of physical changes which occur when alcohol has been consumed and an individual gets involved in aquatic activity. These include:

**Disturbance of the Inner Ear** – Fluid in the ear is responsible for balance. Alcohol and a sudden change in temperature can lead to disorientation. Diving into the water is a perfect opportunity for this: all of a sudden, up becomes down.

**Hypothermia** – Alcohol increases blood flow to the arms and legs, even when the body would normally try to stop this to save heat loss. Fall into the water under the influence of alcohol, and hypothermia kicks in much earlier.

**Spasm of the Vocal Chords** – Water in the windpipe triggers a reflex closure of the windpipe. Alcohol increases the chance that a spasm of the vocal chords will occur, snapping the airway shut. The combination of water and alcohol can lock the airway closed.

ROYAL LIFE SAVING HAS DEVELOPED A NUMBER OF FACT SHEETS ON WATER SAFETY ISSUES IN AUSTRALIA.

Contact Royal Life Saving on: **1300 737 763**  
or download them from: **www.keepwatch.com.au**



## Alcohol and Water Safety Checklist:

- Refrained from entering water if alcohol has been consumed
- Participated in aquatic activities before drinking and did not re-enter water afterwards
- Refrained from consuming alcohol if supervising children
- Avoided aquatic activity alone
- Avoided aquatic activity at night
- Avoided aquatic activity in conditions or environments that are unfamiliar

## Real Life Story - Drink drowning tragedy

The body of a man has been found after he was swept away trying to cross a flooded river. Witnesses saw the man struggle before he disappeared. His body was not found until the following afternoon only metres from where he was swept away. The man had been drinking alcohol with friends prior to trying to cross the river. His death highlights the risks of combining alcohol and water.

**WATER AND ALCOHOL DON'T MIX.**

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