

High risk comes with high consumption

Excess drinking causes problems for police and medical services . . . and your health, reports

Peta Rasdien

Warning bells are ringing over concerns about the health and social implications of a shift in Australia's drinking culture.

Consumption has steadily risen since the 1990s and an estimated 30 per cent of all hospital admissions to emergency departments are related to excessive alcohol consumption. Police say it is responsible for 70 per cent of their workload.

Healthway chairwoman Rosanna Capolingua, who is also a GP, sees the damage alcohol can do every day in her practice.

"Whatever role modelling that generation in front has delivered to the generation behind has made alcohol such an important part of life," she said.

"People used to be embarrassed to get drunk once a year — you

wouldn't talk about it, if someone was vomiting it would be 'Oh my god', now . . . it's like a badge of honour."

But she said there was compelling evidence to show that in the long term it put people at increased risk of stroke, heart disease, renal failure, cancer, liver disease and brain damage, particularly among young binge drinkers.

"It's a very important clinical risk that we need to be asking about, we need to be counselling patients about it," she said.

The marketing and promotion of alcohol was so powerful these days that it had overstepped its place in society, according to Dr Capolingua.

"It will take time for us just to put alcohol back in its place, not to ban it, not to get rid of it, not to be prohibitionist, just to put it back in its place . . . instead of getting

drunk being so celebrated," she said.

"Healthway is doing that with sport and it is working really well and I know that sports themselves are getting pressure to move away from alcohol sponsorship."

Police Commissioner Karl O'Callaghan said there had been a distinct shift in the drinking culture in the past decade and about 70 per cent of police work was driven by excess alcohol consumption.

"Ten to 15 years ago people would have got affected by alcohol, they always have, but now what we are seeing is a propensity (for people) to really write themselves off and I think that's reflected in the fights and assaults that we are seeing," he said.

"People are less able to make rational judgments when they are so affected by alcohol. The unusual thing is the victims are


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also affected by alcohol and they get more badly injured because they are not quick enough to defend themselves or move out of the way."

Mr O'Callaghan said the area where this played out most powerfully was behind closed doors, in family violence.

"We estimate that in about 50 per cent of all family violence incidents the perpetrator is affected by alcohol and as high as 40 per cent of the victims."

He said people were also much quicker to anger.

"Most glassings are in response to a very minor insult . . . so the response is disproportionate . . .

which indicates to me that quite a significant number of people in this generation are much less tolerant, much less better at anger management."

He said police had had to adapt to the change in drinking.

"Unfortunately the most visible response from the blue uniformed police officer out there is that we have had to increase numbers in places like Northbridge and we've had to provide them with more 'less than lethal force options' to deal with people who are out of control," he said.

"The introduction of Tasers was probably driven largely by the development of the alcohol-fuelled

culture in Western Australia."

Public health advocate Mike Daube, who earlier this year co-founded with Professor Fiona Stanley the WA Alcohol and Youth Action Coalition, said there was a real sense in the community that serious action was required.

"People are worried, they are seeing the consequences (of alcohol misuse) all around them and it's not just violence, it is parents who are worried about their kids," Professor Daube said.

"I think we are getting close to that tipping point where the community really does get involved."



Damage control: Dr Rosanna Capolingua deals with the fallout of alcohol abuse.

Picture:Iain Gillespie

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BODY OF RISKS

The havoc alcohol can wreak on the body is far-reaching, with multiple body systems at risk.

1. MOUTH, PHARYNX AND LARYNX AND OESOPHAGUS

Alcohol increases the cancer risk in the mouth, pharynx and larynx by 41 per cent and the oesophagus by 51 per cent.

2. GASTROINTESTINAL SYSTEM

Vomiting associated with alcohol consumption can cause tears at the junction of the oesophagus and stomach and can result in severe bleeding. If fibrosis or cirrhosis of the liver is also present, a secondary problem can occur in which the veins of the gullet develop varices or a type of haemorrhoid and fatal bleeding can result.

3. LIVER

Long-term chronic alcohol abuse can lead to cirrhosis and related loss of liver function, alcoholic hepatitis and acute fatty liver disease. It also increases the risk of liver cancer by 17 per cent.

4. PANCREAS

Excessive alcohol intake can cause chronic pancreatitis and lead to acute haemorrhagic necrotising pancreatitis, which can be fatal. It can also lead to diabetes.

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5. BRAIN

In the short term alcohol depresses the central nervous system and brain function putting those who overindulge at risk of accidents. In the long term it can affect brain development. Mothers who drink while pregnant can have babies with fetal alcohol syndrome and repetitive binge drinking during adolescence can cause irreparable brain damage.

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6. BREASTS

Long-term alcohol consumption is associated with a 22 per cent increased risk of breast cancer.

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7. CARDIOVASCULAR SYSTEM

Sustained alcohol use can lead to dilated cardiomyopathy (an enlarged heart), hypertension, disturbances of the heart rhythm, congestive heart failure and sudden death.

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8. STOMACH

Gastric cancer is associated with alcohol consumption.

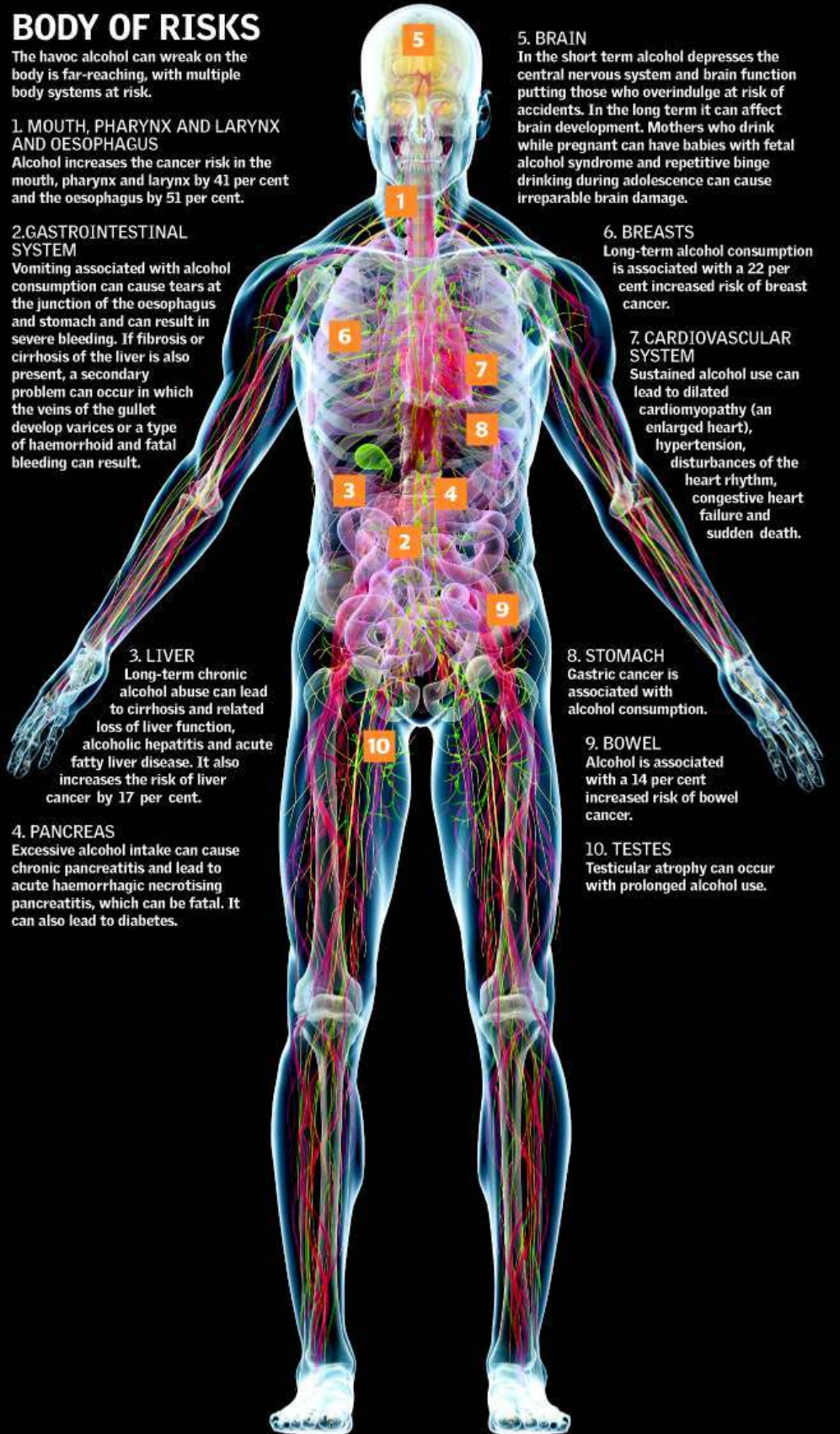
9. BOWEL

Alcohol is associated with a 14 per cent increased risk of bowel cancer.

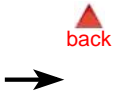
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10. TESTES

Testicular atrophy can occur with prolonged alcohol use.



SOURCE: VICTORIAN INSTITUTE OF FORENSIC MEDICINE DEPUTY DIRECTOR DAVID RANSON, HEART FOUNDATION WA AND CANCER COUNCIL AUSTRALIA



DRINKING GUIDELINES

- The National Health and Medical Research Council recommends people drink no more than two standard drinks on any day to reduce lifetime risk of alcohol-related disease or injury. No more than four standard drinks on a single occasion reduces the risk of alcohol-related injury arising from that occasion.
- Children under 15 years are at the greatest risk of harm from drinking and should not drink at all. Those aged 15-17 years should delay drinking for as long as possible.
- Pregnant or breastfeeding women should not drink at all.

ALCOHOL-RELATED OFFENCES IN 2010

- A total of 20,677 motorists charged with alcohol-related driving offences.
- Alcohol was reported as a possible factor in 47 of the 176 fatal crashes.
- Of the 8963 domestic assaults reported, 4581 were alcohol-related.
- Of the 13,094 non-domestic assaults, 5187 were alcohol-related.

SOURCE: WA POLICE