

A MID-POINT REVIEW OF THE NATIONAL ALCOHOL STRATEGY 2019-2028:

How is Australia tracking on reducing
alcohol use and harms?

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Every Australian deserves to live a happy, healthy life in connected, safe communities. Sadly, this is not the reality for many people experiencing harm caused by alcohol products.

In December 2019, the Australian Government released the National Alcohol Strategy 2019-2028 (the Strategy). The Strategy aims to prevent and minimise alcohol-related harms in Australia, including by targeting a 10% reduction in harmful alcohol use.

The Strategy outlines steps for measuring progress, including the publication of annual activity reports, and identifies a range of indicators and baseline data to measure reductions in alcohol use and harms. However, to date, there has been no demonstration of progress being made under the Strategy.

Given this lack of public monitoring or reporting, Alcohol Change Australia decided to undertake a review to determine if progress is being made and to identify opportunities for action for the remaining four years of the Strategy. This report aims to provide a mid-point review of the Strategy by bringing together a range of data sources and identifying any shifts in alcohol use and harms in Australia since the release of the Strategy in 2019. For some indicators, there are multiple data points available since the Strategy was launched; for others, there are only one or two years of data available.

What did we find?

- **There has been minimal or no change in alcohol use and harms across a range of indicators since the Strategy was introduced in 2019.**
- Harms from alcohol across a range of measures have increased over the last decade.
- Alcohol-induced deaths are at their highest rate in 10 years.
- There has been no reduction in alcohol-related motor vehicle crashes.
- There has been no decline in per capita alcohol consumption over the last 10 years.
- Many Australians continue to drink alcohol at risky levels.

Successive governments in Australia have not implemented the comprehensive policy approach needed to prevent and reduce alcohol harms in our country. As a result, alcohol products continue to have a devastating impact on the Australian community. This is an issue that has gone under the radar for too long.

The evidence is clear that alcohol products are causing harm and change is urgently needed. We have the information — it's now time to act.

ABOUT ALCOHOL CHANGE AUSTRALIA

Alcohol Change Australia is a group of health and community organisations working together to prevent and reduce harm among Australian individuals, families, and communities.

Visit alcoholchangeaus.org.au for details of our members and work.

SCORECARD

How is Australia tracking when it comes to reducing alcohol use and harms?

TABLE 1: CHANGE IN ALCOHOL USE AND HARMS SINCE THE INTRODUCTION OF THE NATIONAL ALCOHOL STRATEGY IN DECEMBER 2019.

INDICATOR	STATUS
Alcohol-induced deaths	
Alcohol-attributable deaths	
Alcohol-attributable hospitalisations	
Alcohol-related motor vehicle crashes	
Experiences of alcohol-related incidents	
Total alcohol consumption per capita ¹	
Proportion of people who receive publicly funded specialist AOD services who nominate alcohol as their primary drug of concern	
Proportion of Australian adults drinking alcohol at levels that increase their risk of alcohol-related disease or injury	
Proportion of people identifying as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander drinking alcohol at levels that increase their risk of alcohol-related disease or injury	
Proportion of Australian adults drinking 11 or more standard drinks on a single occasion at least monthly	
Proportion of pregnant women drinking alcohol during their pregnancy	
Proportion of high school students who have ever drunk alcohol	
Average age at which young people first tried alcohol	

INDICATOR HAS
WORSENED SINCE 2019



MINIMAL OR
NO CHANGE SINCE 2019



INDICATOR HAS
IMPROVED SINCE 2019



¹ For this indicator, data is only available for 2019-2020. The status indicates minimal or no change in the last 10 years.

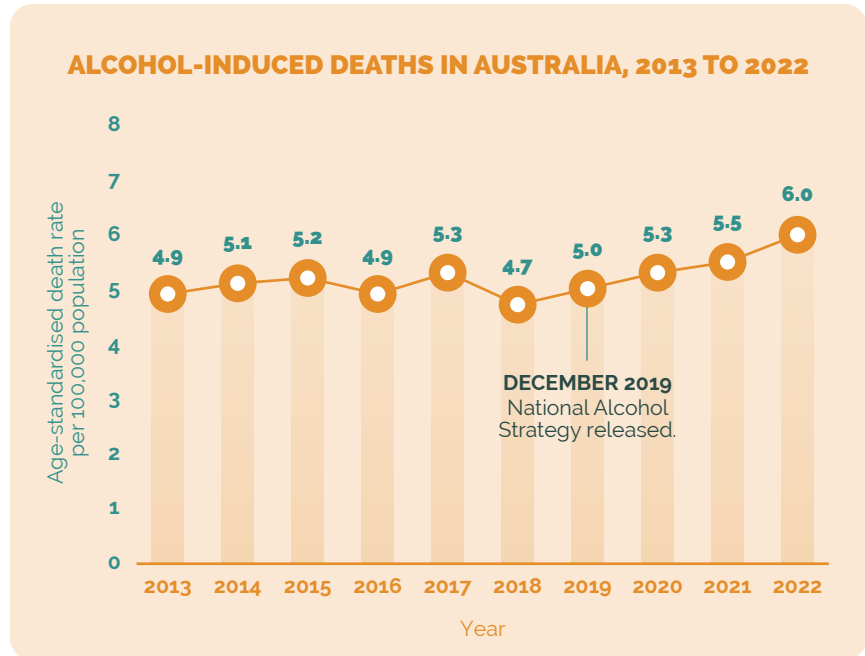
ALCOHOL HARMS IN AUSTRALIA

Alcohol-induced deaths

Alcohol-induced deaths are at their highest rate in a decade.

In 2022, there were **1,742 alcohol-induced deaths in Australia**, an additional 164 deaths compared to 2021.

Alcohol-induced deaths are those where the underlying cause can be directly attributed to alcohol use, including acute conditions such as alcohol poisoning or chronic conditions such as alcoholic liver cirrhosis.



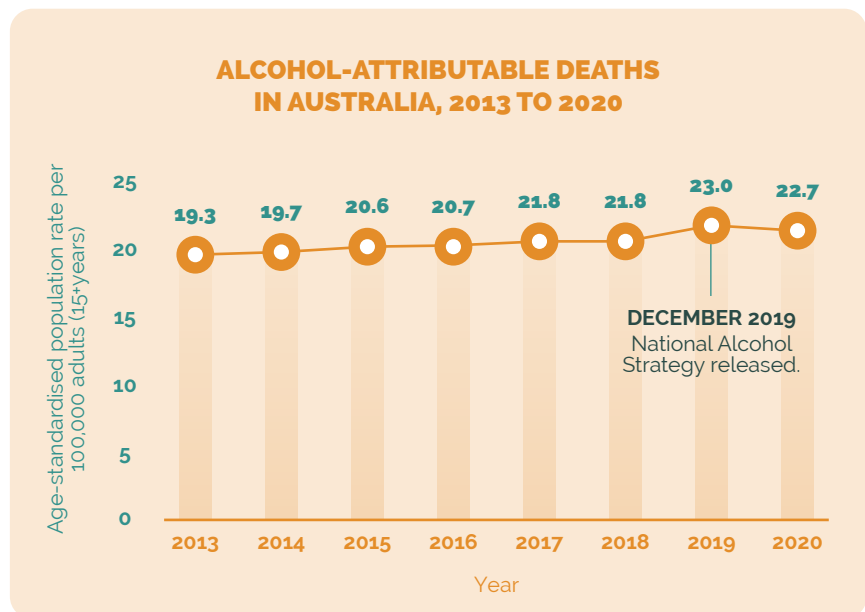
Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics. Causes of Death, Australia. 2023.

Alcohol-attributable deaths

In 2020, there were **4,734 deaths attributed to alcohol in Australia**.

The rate of alcohol-attributable deaths has increased over the last decade.

Alcohol-attributable deaths include wholly alcohol-caused conditions (e.g. alcohol poisoning, alcoholic liver cirrhosis) and estimate alcohol's contribution to partially alcohol-caused conditions (e.g. injuries, cancers).



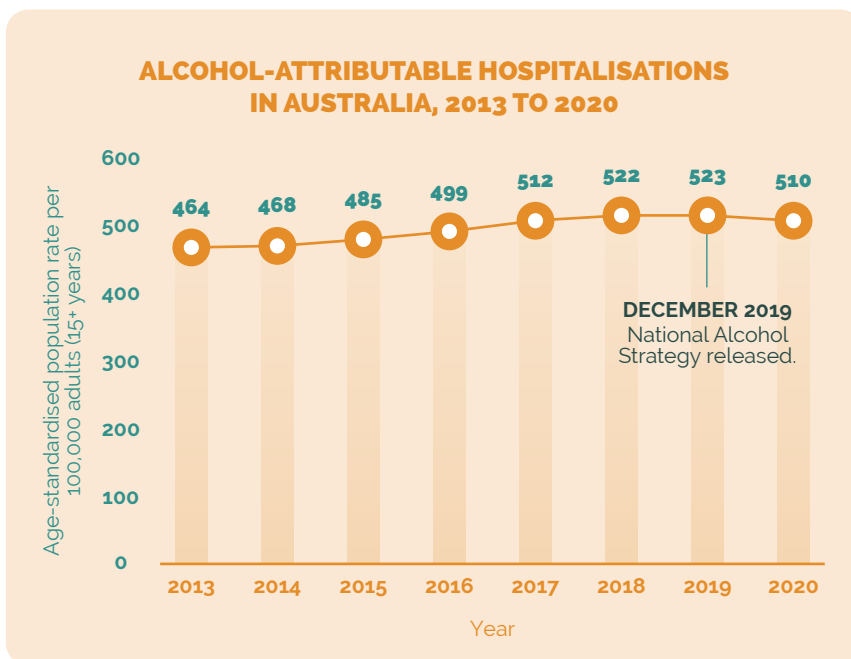
Source: Gilmore, W, et al. Australian alcohol-attributable harm visualisation tool version 2.1. National Drug Research Institute, Curtin University and Canadian Institute for Substance Use Research, University of Victoria. 2023.

Alcohol-attributable hospitalisations

In 2020, there were over **106,000** hospitalisations attributed to alcohol in Australia.

The rate of alcohol-attributable hospitalisations has increased over the last decade.

Alcohol-attributable hospitalisations include wholly alcohol-caused conditions (e.g. alcohol poisoning, alcoholic liver cirrhosis) and estimate alcohol's contribution to partially alcohol-caused conditions (e.g. injuries, cancers).



Source: Gilmore, W, et al. Australian alcohol-attributable harm visualisation tool version 2.1. National Drug Research Institute, Curtin University and Canadian Institute for Substance Use Research, University of Victoria. 2023.

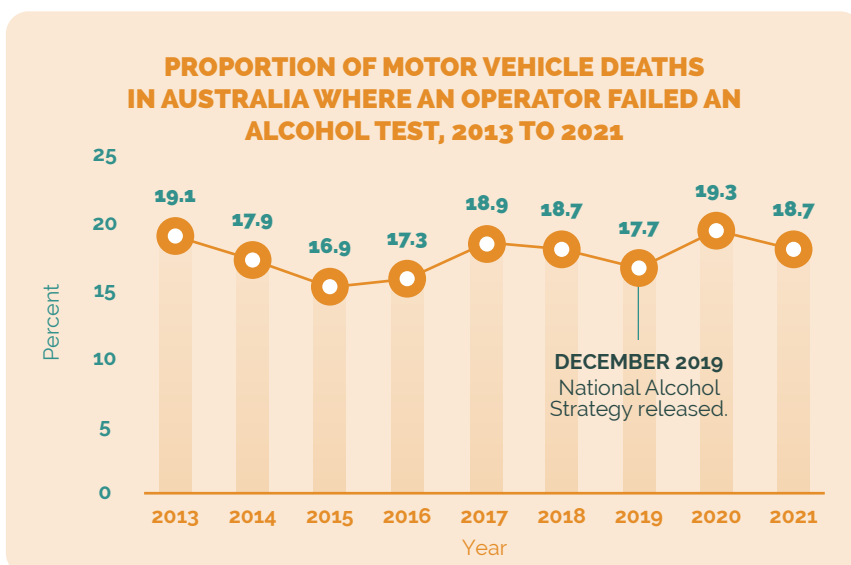
We are seeing people coming to ED every day with alcohol related presentations; it used to mainly be the weekends, but now it's every day. It is not just the injuries that are preventable, we are now seeing alcoholic liver disease and other complications in the young and old. It is a failure of public policy that this is happening, not poor individual choice.

— Emergency department physician, Victoria

Alcohol-related motor vehicle crashes

In 2021, **137** Australians died in motor vehicle crashes where the driver was affected by alcohol.

Over the last decade, there has been minimal change in the proportion of motor vehicle deaths where alcohol was involved.



Note: 'Operators' comprises drivers and motorcycle riders. Excludes Western Australia and Victoria as data is not available for these jurisdictions.

Source: Bureau of Infrastructure and Transport Research Economics. Road Trauma Australia 2022 statistical summary. 2023.

The tragedy of alcohol-related crashes plays out daily in hospitals throughout Australia. Injuries to an alcohol affected driver, or even more tragically, injuries to people from any crash caused by an alcohol affected driver devastate survivors for a lifetime.

Trauma surgeons witness this. Even small amounts of alcohol use degrade judgement and motor skills, prolonging reaction time and increasing crash risk. As a trauma surgeon, in the first country in the world to institute roadside random breath testing for alcohol, my hope is for an end to the horror of this preventable injury burden.

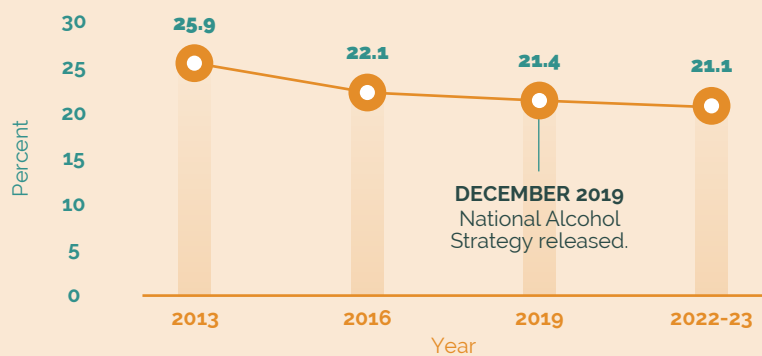
— Vascular and trauma surgeon, Sydney

Experiences of alcohol-related incidents

In 2022-23, around 1 in 5 people (21%) reported having been verbally or physically abused or put in fear by someone under the influence of alcohol in the previous 12 months. This is the equivalent of **4.6 million Australians.**

There has been little change in these numbers since 2016.

PROPORTION OF AUSTRALIANS AGED 14 YEARS AND OVER WHO WERE THE VICTIM OF AN ALCOHOL-RELATED INCIDENT, 2013 TO 2022-23



Source: Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. National Drug Strategy Household Survey 2022-23; Data table 4.54. 2024.

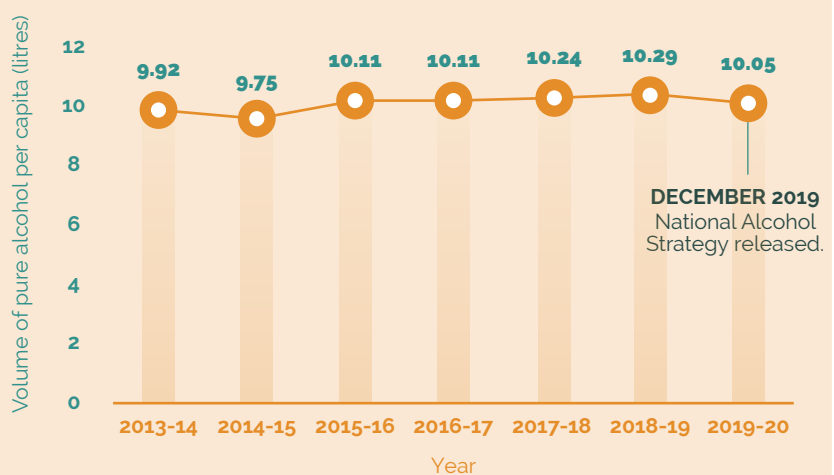
Total alcohol consumption per capita

In 2019-20, 208.8 million litres of pure alcohol were made available in Australia.

Apparent consumption of alcohol per capita has remained stable at around 10 litres per capita since 2013.

Apparent consumption of alcohol refers to the total amount of alcohol either produced in Australia or imported into Australia, that will be sold to people living in Australia. Per capita consumption refers to the Australian population aged 15 and over.

APPARENT CONSUMPTION OF ALCOHOL IN AUSTRALIA, 2013-14 TO 2019-20



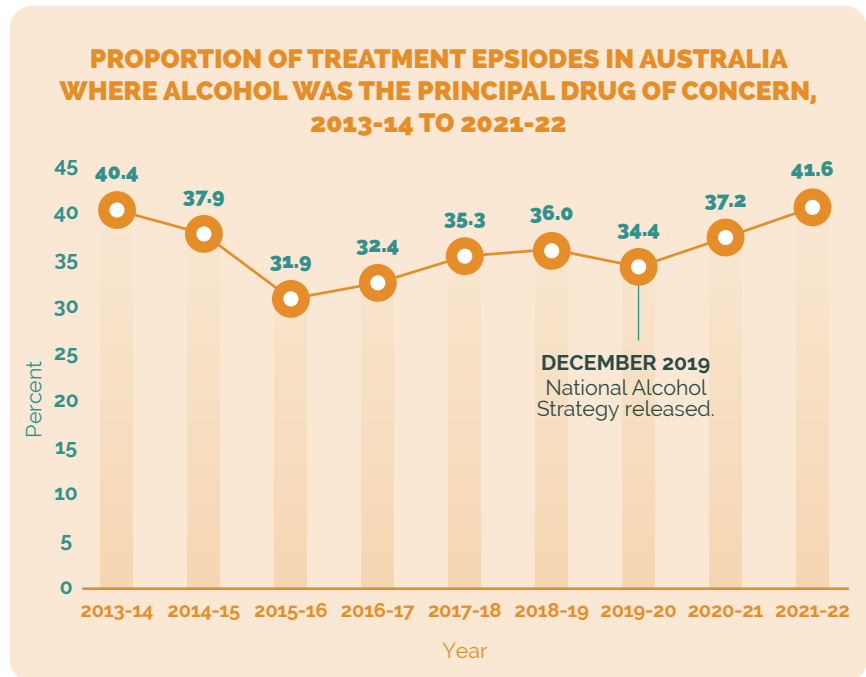
Source: Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. Apparent consumption of alcohol in Australia: 1944-45 to 2019-20; Data table 7. 2023.

Proportion of people who receive publicly funded specialist AOD services who nominate alcohol as their primary drug of concern

People may seek alcohol and other drug treatment services for use of one or several substances. The principal drug of concern is the main substance that the client stated led them to seek treatment.

In 2021-22, the most common principal drug of concern was alcohol with **87,300 treatment episodes.**

In the last 10 years, alcohol has remained the most common principal drug of concern, increasing from 69,400 episodes over this period.



Source: Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. Alcohol and other drug treatment services in Australia annual report; Data tables 2021-22 Drg. Drugs Table 5. 2023.

Alcohol consistently remains in the top three drugs being named as primary drugs of concern for clients at our public-funded service. In fact, in the past year, 35% of our clients named it as their primary drug of concern across our individual AOD counselling programs, which is still a concerningly high proportion.

What we find is that our clients take longer to recover from alcohol than other drugs such as methamphetamine. Alcohol is also significantly reported as a primary drug of concern where clients have complex and severe issues, and sadly, we often see that alcohol has the compounding effect of contributing to those complexities.

— Alcohol and other drug counsellor, Brisbane

Proportion of Australian adults drinking alcohol at levels that increased their risk of alcohol-related disease or injury

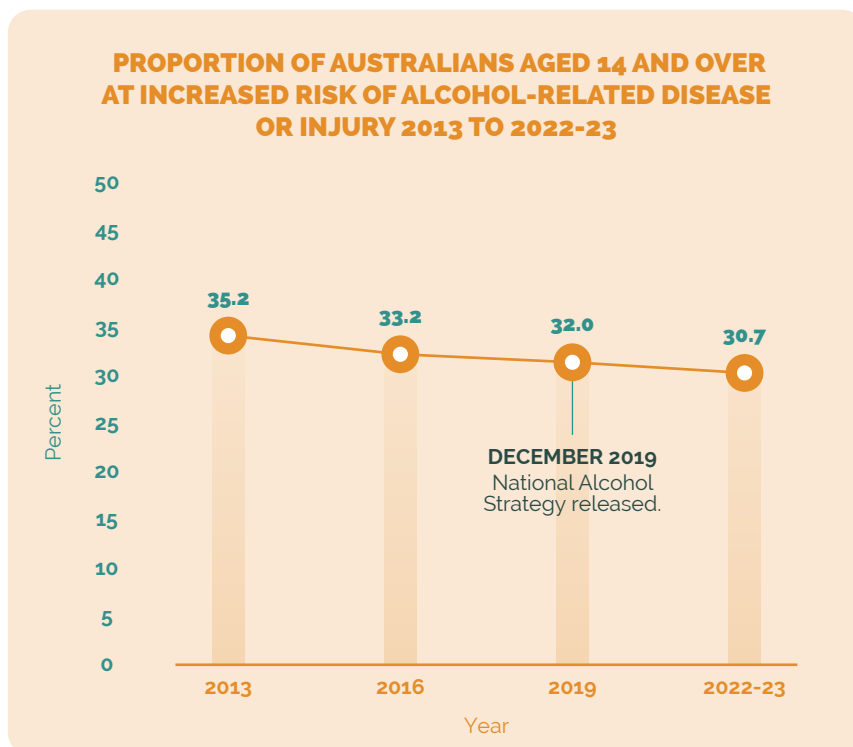
Guideline 1 of the *Australian guidelines to reduce health risks from drinking alcohol* states that to reduce the risk of harm from alcohol-related disease or injury, healthy men and women should drink no more than 10 standard drinks a week and no more than 4 standard drinks on any one day.

In 2022-23,

31% of Australians aged 14 years and over

drank alcohol at levels that put them at risk of alcohol-related disease or injury, the equivalent of 6.6 million people.

These Australians drank more than 10 standard drinks per week and/or drank more than 4 standard drinks on a single day at least once a month in the past 12 months.



Source: Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. National Drug Household Strategy Survey 2022-23; Data table 4.25. 2024.

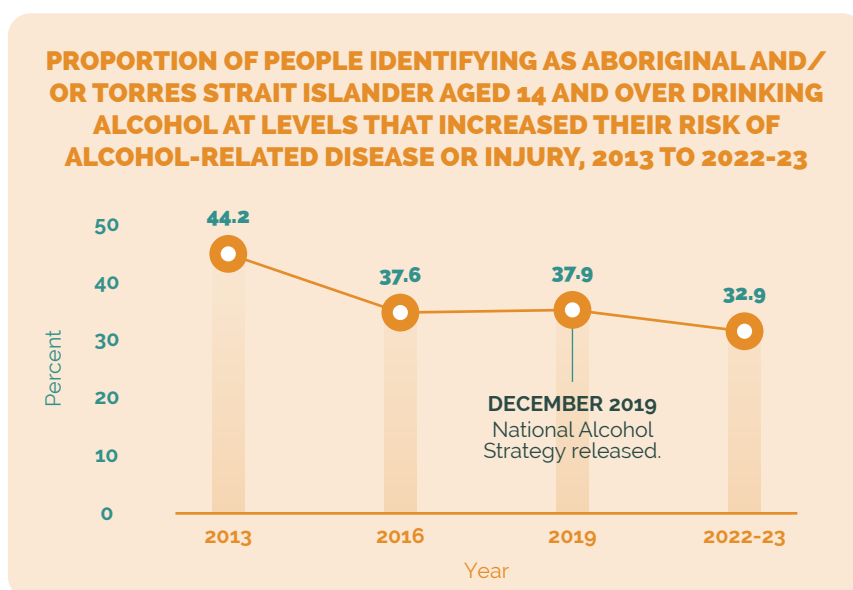
Proportion of people identifying as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander drinking alcohol at levels that increased their risk of alcohol-related disease or injury

In 2022-23,

33% of people identifying as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander

drank alcohol at levels that put them at risk of alcohol-related disease or injury.

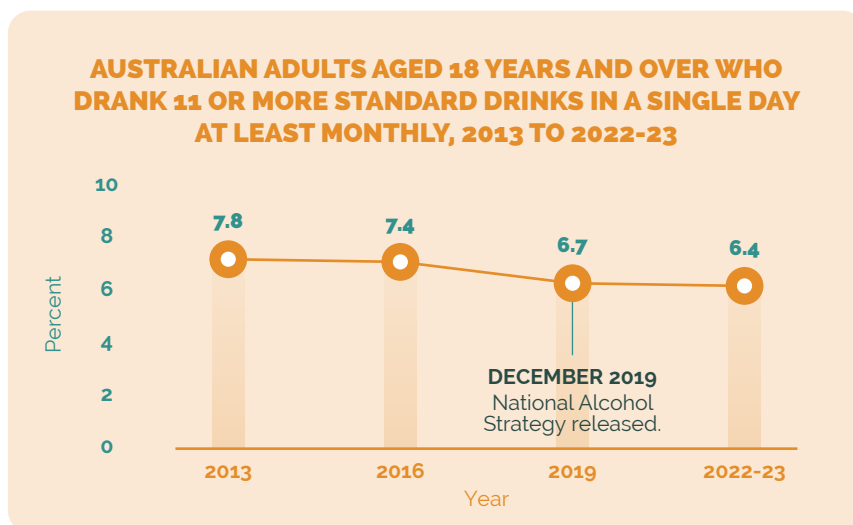
There has been a substantial decline in rates of risky drinking among First Nations people. In 2022-23, First Nations people had similar rates of risky drinking to non-Indigenous people.



Source: Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. National Drug Household Strategy Survey 2022-23; Data table 10.1. 2024.

Proportion of population drinking 11 or more standard drinks on a single occasion at least monthly

In 2022-23,
6.4% of
Australians
drank 11 or more
standard drinks
on a single
occasion at
least monthly,
a level well in excess of
the guidelines.

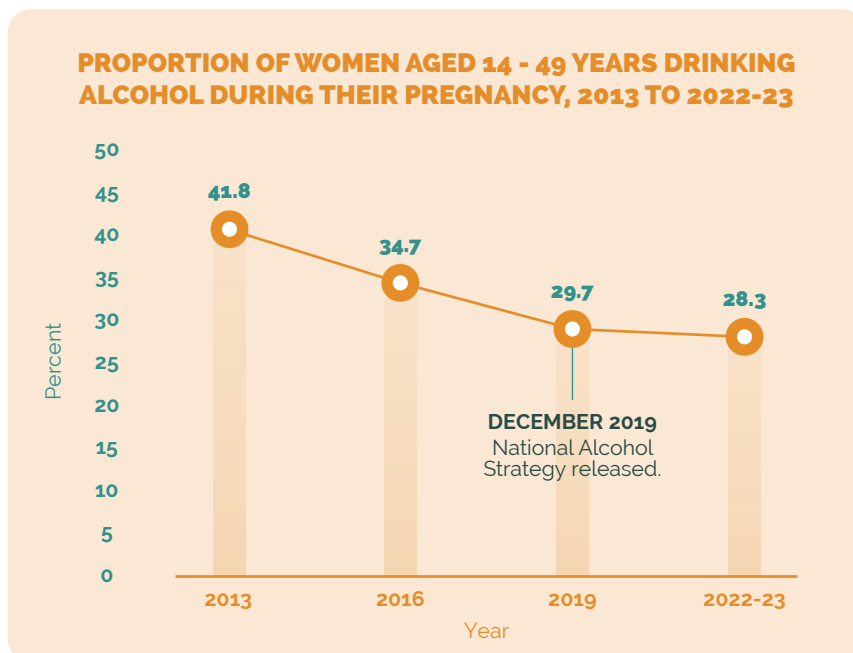


Source: Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. National Drug Household Strategy Survey 2022-23; Data table 4.32. 2024.

Proportion of pregnant women drinking alcohol during their pregnancy

In 2022-23,
28% of
women
drank alcohol
during their
pregnancy.

While there has been a significant reduction in the proportion of women drinking alcohol while pregnant in the last decade, the decline slowed between 2019 and 2022-23.



Source: Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. National Drug Household Strategy Survey 2022-23; Data table 10.21. 2024.

Despite a decline, nearly 30% of pregnancies in Australia are still exposed to alcohol. The further reduction of this figure through public health information, targeted truthful campaigns, and critical supports for women is essential. An alcohol-free start to life is the foundation of healthy development.

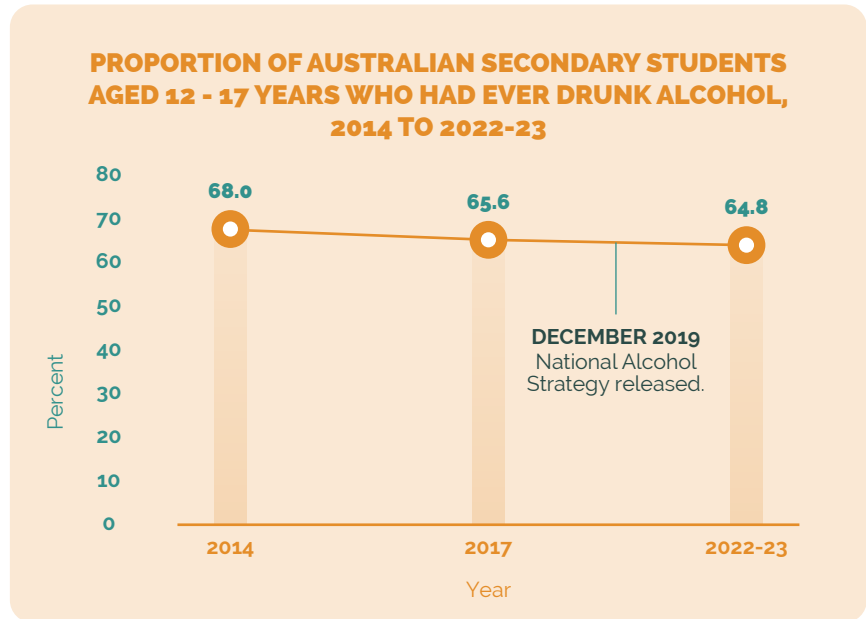
— Non-government organisation CEO

Proportion of high school students who had ever drunk alcohol

In 2022-23, **nearly two-thirds (65%)** of secondary school students in Australia

reported having ever drunk alcohol, including just a few sips.

There was no significant difference in the prevalence of drinking alcohol between 2017 and 2022-23.



Note: Caution should be exercised when interpreting trends over time due to reasons outlined on page 4 of the ASSAD 2022-23 report.

Source: Scully M, et al. ASSAD 2022-2023: Australian secondary school students' use of alcohol and other substances.; Figure 1 (p8). 2024.

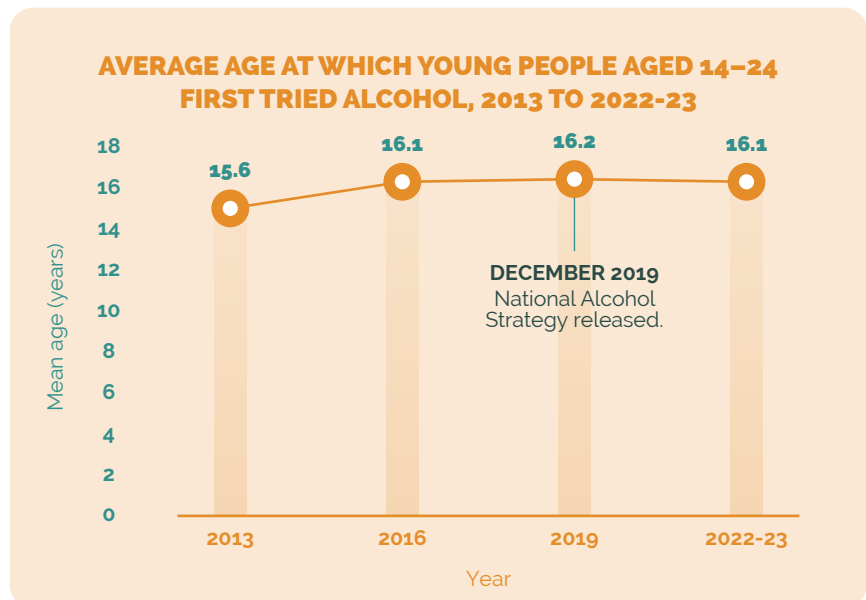
Average age at which young people aged 14-24 first tried alcohol

The NHMRC guidelines recommend that people under 18 years do not drink alcohol.

In 2022-23, the average age that 14-24 year olds first drank a full serve of alcohol was

16.1 years.

There has been no change in this average age since 2016.



Source: Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. National Drug Household Strategy Survey 2022-23; Data table 4.13. 2024.

CONCLUSION

Too many Australians continue to experience harm from alcohol. Over the last decade, we have seen no meaningful reductions in rates of alcohol harm.

We know what works to reduce harm from alcohol. The time is now for the Australian Government to take more responsibility for regulating alcohol products and introduce proven measures that reduce harms from alcohol products. Alcohol Change Australia calls on the Australian Government to:

- Protect the community from alcohol marketing;
- Address cheap alcohol that fuels harm;
- Empower the community by raising awareness of the harms caused by alcohol;
- Support alcohol-free pregnancies; and
- Create healthy public policy free of industry influence.

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