

Australians' attitudes towards their health, consuming alcohol and taking a break from alcohol

Survey highlights

VicHealth, in partnership with FebFast, conducted an online survey of a nationally-representative sample of 2008 Australians aged 18 years or older who had not previously participated in FebFast or similar activities. Survey respondents provided answers to questions regarding their general health and wellbeing, and their alcohol-related attitudes and behaviours. The sample was representative of the Australian population based upon age and gender characteristics.

Alcohol in Australia

In Australia, alcohol is second only to tobacco as a preventable cause of drug-related death and hospitalisation.¹ Alcohol is a cause of injury, accidents, violence and over 200 physical and mental illnesses, and was the cause of 5554 deaths and 157,132 hospitalisations in 2010. Nearly half (47%) of these hospitalisations were for alcohol-related injuries.²

The *Australian guidelines to reduce health risks from drinking alcohol* recommends drinking no more than two standard drinks of alcohol on any day to reduce the lifetime risk of harm from alcohol-related disease and no more than four standard drinks of alcohol on a single drinking occasion to reduce the risk of alcohol-related injury arising from that occasion.¹

The survey

In November 2014, 2008 people aged 18 years or older across Australia completed VicHealth's online survey relating to their general health and wellbeing, and their alcohol consumption behaviours and attitudes. The sample was drawn from an online panel and was representative of the Australian population for age and gender.

Respondents were excluded if they had previously completed FebFast or any other abstinence initiative such as Ocober, Dry July and Hello Sunday Morning.

VicHealth and FebFast were particularly interested to find out how satisfied Australians are with their general health and wellbeing, what they think will have the biggest impacts on their current and future health, their confidence in making improvements to their health, their relationship with alcohol, and if they would consider giving up alcohol for 28 days.

Statistical differences within data were determined when results produced p-values of 0.05 or less. Except where otherwise noted, the data presented in this report was cross-tabulated and checked for significance.

ALCOHOL AND THE HEALTH OF AUSTRALIANS

Although Australians are now living longer, they are also increasingly living with lifestyle-related chronic diseases and associated health conditions. Chronic diseases are generally associated with risk factors such as smoking, physical inactivity, poor nutrition and the harmful use of alcohol.

The *Australia's Health 2014* report revealed that in 2011–12:

- 92% of Australians were not eating enough vegetables for good nutrition
- 57% did not meet the recommended national physical activity guidelines
- 16% of Australians smoked
- 20% consumed alcohol at levels that placed them at risk of lifetime harm.³

Key findings

General health and wellbeing

How do Australians view their health?

Survey respondents were asked to rate their current health, with the most common response being 'good' (41%), followed by a third (33%) selecting either 'very good' or 'excellent', and a quarter (25%) selecting either 'poor' or 'very poor'.

A similar pattern was evident when respondents were asked to consider their health in five years' time. Half (51%) of the sample believed they would have 'about the same level of health', while a third (33%) felt that they would be 'healthier than they are right now'. Conversely one in six (15%) thought that they would be 'unhealthier than they are currently'.

Although a greater proportion of males rated their health negatively compared to females (27% vs 24%), this was not statistically significant. There were also no significant differences between age groups when rating their current health. However, younger Australians were more likely to believe they would be healthier in five years' time compared to their older counterparts. For instance, 42% of those aged 18-24 and 38% aged 25-34 believed they would be healthier in five years' time, compared to those aged 45-54 (29%), 55-64 (26%), 65-74 (20%), and 75 and older (7%).

What are the most important factors impacting on Australians' health?

Respondents were first asked to rate a range of health behaviours by importance (Table 1). A majority of Australians believed that factors related to consuming food or alcohol and not getting enough exercise would have the most impact on their health and wellbeing.

Table 1: Importance of behaviours on individual health and wellbeing

Health behaviour	Important/ very important
Not doing enough exercise	77%
Not eating enough fruit and vegetables	73%
Having too much added sugar	63%
Eating too much junk food	62%
Drinking too much alcohol	53%
Working too many hours	46%
Too much TV and computer screen time	45%
Too much time on social media	28%

When asked to rate the most important health and wellbeing improvements to achieve over the next five years and their confidence in achieving these outcomes, most respondents believed that maintaining a healthy weight, exercising, eating healthier foods, and achieving financial stability were important for them. However fewer actually had confidence in their ability to achieve these (Table 2). An exception was reducing alcohol intake, which only a quarter of Australians felt was important, but 60% were confident they could achieve.

Table 2: Most important health and wellbeing improvements and confidence in achieving them

	Important/ very important	Confident/ very confident
Healthy weight	80%	49%
Exercise	76%	46%
Healthier foods	74%	59%
Financial stability	74%	41%
Energy levels	72%	40%
Stress reduction	68%	42%
Work/life balance	54%	45%
Skin/overall appearance	48%	36%
Reduce alcohol intake	27%	60%

Alcohol consumption patterns

The next series of questions focused on Australians' drinking behaviours, perceptions of their drinking habits and whether they would consider giving up alcohol for a month.

How much do Australians drink?

To reduce the risk of injury or harm from drinking alcohol, it is recommended that Australians drink no more than four standard drinks on a single drinking occasion.¹ Based on this guideline, survey participants were asked whether they had consumed five or more standard drinks on a single occasion during the previous three months. Respondents were categorised according to their responses as follows:

Drinker behaviour	Definition
Non-drinkers →	Had not consumed alcohol during the previous three months
Low risk drinkers →	Never consumed five or more standard drinks on a single occasion
Risky drinkers →	Had consumed five or more standard drinks on a single occasion during the previous three months

Almost half (46%) of those sampled were classified as risky drinkers, while a third were low risk drinkers. A fifth (22%) identified as non-drinkers. Females were more likely than males to be non-drinkers (26% vs 16%) or low risk drinkers (37% vs 29%). In comparison males were more likely to be risky drinkers (55% vs 37%).

Drinking behaviour varied by age, with older groups likely to be low risk drinkers and younger groups more likely to drink in a risky manner. Forty-one per cent of those aged 65-74 and 46% aged 75 or older were low risk drinkers, compared to 24% of young people aged 18-24. Similarly, young people aged 18-24 (50%) and 25-34 (56%) were more likely to be risky drinkers than those aged 55-64 (40%), 65-74 (38%) or 75 years or older (34%).

Over two-thirds of Australian drinkers would consider giving up alcohol for a month; three out of four drinkers said they would find it easy to do this.

How do Australians feel about their drinking behaviour?

Respondents who reported consuming alcohol were asked to describe their relationship with alcohol. Over three quarters (77%) were 'not worried', followed by 17% who were 'a little bit worried' by their drinking. Relatively few were worried (5%) or very worried (1%). Four out of five (80%) females selected 'not worried' when describing their relationship with alcohol, compared to 74% of males, while those aged 25-34 (24%) and 35-44 (22%) were more concerned about their drinking than young people aged 18-24 (14%).

The majority of non-drinkers (90%) and low risk drinkers (93%) were not concerned about their drinking, compared to less than two thirds (63%) of risky drinkers. Subsequently, one in four (27%) risky drinkers were worried about their drinking compared to just 5% of non-drinkers.

Would Australians consider giving up alcohol for a month?

Over two-thirds (69%) of Australian drinkers would consider giving up alcohol for a month, with 14% unsure and 17% selecting 'no'. Females were more receptive to the idea of abstaining from alcohol compared to males (75% vs 64%). Young people aged 18-24 (82%) were more likely to consider giving up alcohol than those aged 25-34 (69%), 45-54 (66%), 55-64 (67%), 65-74 (65%) and 75+ and older (56%). There were no significant differences found in the likelihood of considering giving up alcohol for a month based upon low risk and risky drinking.

Subsequently, drinkers were also asked how easy or difficult they would find it to give up alcohol for 28 days. Almost three quarters (73%) answered that they would find it easy. Further analysis showed:

- Females (81%) were more likely to report that they would find giving up alcohol for a month easy, compared to males (69%).
- 18-24 year olds (18%) were less likely than those aged 25-34 (26%), 35-44 (26%), and 45-54 (29%) to find it difficult to give up alcohol for a month.
- Risky drinkers (39%) would find it more difficult to abstain from alcohol, compared to non-drinkers (17%).

Perception of community and individual alcohol use

The final two questions of the survey examined perceptions of alcohol as an issue affecting society generally, and the individual drinker. The first, asked of all survey participants, was:

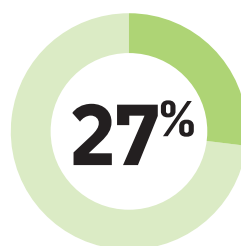
'Thinking about the health risks associated with consuming too much alcohol in Australia, do you agree or disagree that alcohol is a serious issue for our community?'

A majority of respondents (87%) agreed with the statement, however, there were differences based upon gender, age and drinking pattern. For instance:

- Females (92%) were more likely to agree that alcohol is a serious issue for the community compared to males (89%).
- Those aged 18-24 (83%) were less likely to agree with the statement, compared to those aged 35-44, 55-64, 65-74 and 75 and older (variously 90-94%).
- Non-drinkers (94%) were also more likely to agree with the statement compared to risky drinkers (89%).

Australian drinkers were also asked whether they were worried about the amount of alcohol they consume, with less than one in five (18%) agreeing. Further analysis showed:

- Males (20%) were more likely to express concern about their own drinking than females (16%), as were risky drinkers (28%) compared to non-drinkers (22%) and low risk drinkers (5%).



One in four (27%) risky drinkers were worried about their drinking

Conclusions

Overall, Australians tended to rate their current health positively, but there is room for improvement. While a majority agreed on the importance of achieving certain goals for their future health and wellbeing, many doubt they would actually achieve this. Interestingly, only a quarter of Australians believed their alcohol consumption would impact on their future health, while almost two-thirds were confident that they could change their drinking behaviour if they wanted.

This survey also showed that almost half (46%) of Australians reported drinking at levels that increase their risk of harm in the short term, so have cause to consider changing the way they drink. This is particularly pronounced among young people. While 81% of those aged 18-24 were not concerned about their relationship with alcohol, over half (50%) reported drinking at risky levels. However, 82% of the same group reported that they would consider giving up alcohol for 28 days. Further, over two-thirds of Australians (69%) would consider doing the same.

These findings indicate that many Australians would be receptive to and could benefit from participating in FebFast.

An evaluation of the FebFast program, conducted by VicHealth in 2011, found that almost half of those surveyed who had given up alcohol for the month of February reported drinking less alcohol on each occasion after the FebFast period was over.⁴

About FebFast

FebFast is a 28-day challenge that encourages people to forgo a health vice for the month of February while raising money to support young people experiencing alcohol and other drug-related problems. When FebFast was launched, giving up alcohol for a month was the sole focus and continues to be the most popular vice people choose to complete. Since then it has evolved to include other vices and in 2015 FebFasters can choose from five habits to give up for a month including alcohol, sugar, social media, smoking or junk food. For more information or to register for a fast, visit www.febfast.org.au

References

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