

HCF

# Health Report

SPECIAL REPORT

NO. 8



legal drugs

# drug awareness

When we think of people dependent on drugs, we often think of illegal drugs like heroin and marijuana. But drugs such as alcohol and tobacco can affect us all, and are probably a greater health problem for the community.

## The facts

If you've ever had a problem with alcohol, cigarettes, or tranquillisers, you're not alone. But you should be aware that abuse of any of these legal substances can seriously damage your health. Every year, about 20,000 Australians die from diseases caused by smoking.

At the same time, The National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre estimates 6.5 per cent of Australians over the age of 18 have an alcohol use disorder while 2.9 per cent of all Australian deaths are alcohol-related.

While the abuse of pharmaceuticals is largely hidden, the Australian Drug Foundation says that an astounding 185 million prescriptions were dispensed in 1998. That is, an average of 10 prescriptions for each man, woman and child in the country.

"When you lose control over your ability to decide when you want to stop using a drug, you have a dependency problem," says Dr Louisa Degenhardt, a lecturer at the National Drug and

Alcohol Research Centre.

That dependency can be both psychological and physical, she says. For many of us, legal drug use is associated with pleasure. Any attempt to quit or cut down can seem like a loss of enjoyment.

"Physically, if we use any drug long enough and often enough we will also suffer withdrawal symptoms when we attempt to stop using it," says Dr Degenhardt.

It's not surprising then, that to give up a drug you'll not only need to alter your attitude to drug use but get support over the physical symptoms.

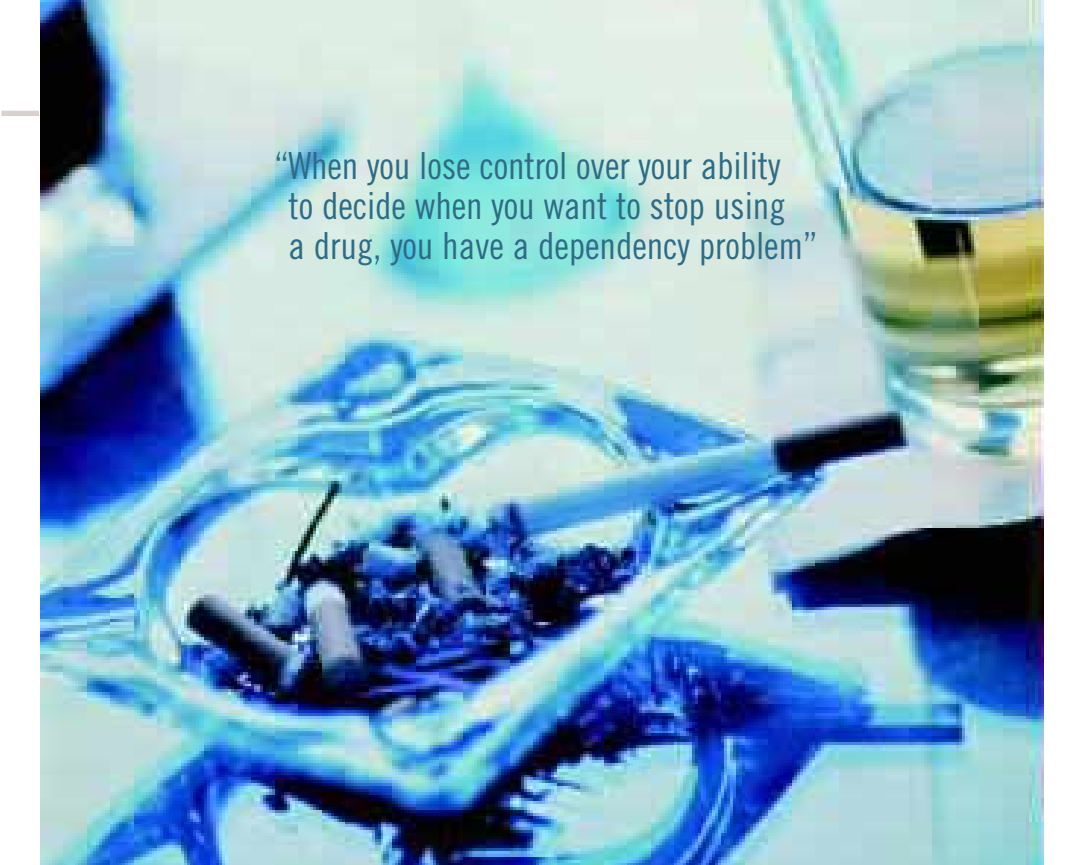
## TOBACCO

### What's in cigarettes?

An average smoker, on one packet a day, inhales more than half a cup (150ml) of tar from cigarettes each year.

Tar is the main cause of lung and throat cancer in smokers and it also aggravates bronchial and respiratory disease.

As well as this toxic substance, a smoker gets an addictive shot of nicotine. It takes only 7.5 seconds for this poison to act on the brain, followed by a relaxed feeling about



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half an hour later.

Besides these two toxins, small amounts of more than 4,000 other substances can be found in cigarette smoke, including 43 that have been identified as causing cancer.

Every day, one in four Australians draws these substances into their lungs. While statistics show that the number of Australians who smoke is declining, from 37 per cent of the population in 1977 to 24 per cent now, medical experts say that number is still too high.

### **What will smoking do to my health?**

Smoking is related to an increased risk of emphysema (a chronic,

progressive disease which destroys lung tissue); cancer of the mouth, larynx, oesophagus, bladder, kidney, pancreas and cervix; increased risk of stomach ulcers and of pneumonia; cardiovascular disease, depression, diabetes, peptic ulcers, osteoporosis, and even Alzheimer's disease.

Men who smoke may suffer impotence and women who smoke may take longer to conceive and be more likely to have a miscarriage.

Children whose parents smoke are more likely to get pneumonia and bronchitis in the first year of life, suffer from more frequent and severe asthma attacks and become regular smokers themselves.

Smoking can also damage your

### **How do you know if you have a dependency?**

If your habit is:

- damaging your health and/or mental wellbeing
- affecting your ability to function at work
- upsetting your relationships with family and friends, or
- taking over your life

**it's time to seek help.**

looks, by depleting skin of collagen, leading to accelerated ageing.

### **What if I give up?**

The day you quit smoking, the carbon monoxide levels in your body drop dramatically.

Within seven days your blood becomes less sticky and your risk of dying suddenly from a heart attack starts to decline. Four to five years later, the chance you will have a heart attack falls to nearly that of someone who has never smoked.

Best of all, your risk of dying from lung cancer starts to fall towards that of a non-smoker.

According to The Cancer Council NSW, your accumulated risk of death from lung cancer if you stop smoking around the age of 40 is only two per cent higher than someone who has never smoked. That compares to a 12 per cent higher risk of getting lung cancer by age 75 than someone who has never smoked – if you continue to smoke cigarettes.

### **I need some help**

Most smokers want to give up – 75 per cent of smokers have tried to cut down or quit altogether. But they need help.

Nicotine addiction is a severe drug dependency, says Renee Bittoun, of the Nicotine Addiction Unit at the University of Sydney.

“We shouldn’t just expect people to manage to quit on their own,” she says.

“Some kind of pharmacological



assistance, in the form of nicotine patches, gums, inhalers or sprays, is 100 per cent better than cold turkey.”

Your GP can offer advice on support medication available. Understanding your nicotine addiction, knowing why you smoke – it could be because of emotions, pleasure, social pressure, or habit as well as addiction – and having a quitting plan will also increase your likelihood of success, according to QUIT.

“While nicotine patches may help you wean yourself off



in the struggle (to becoming a non-smoker.) After three months, you really have made it!"

## ALCOHOL

### The good, the bad and the ugly

In Australia, a cold beer, or a glass of chardonnay is part of our culture.

After all, 'moderate' drinking, is supposed to have benefits including a reduction in heart disease and stroke, lower levels of stress and even possible protection against Alzheimer's disease.

Researchers tell us that alcohol increases blood levels of high density lipoprotein (good) cholesterol and decreases the likelihood of blood clots. Red wine also contains high levels of antioxidants called flavonoids that protect against ageing free radicals.

But how many of us are really aware of what 'moderate' drinking is? In reality it's no more than two units of alcohol for women and four for men a day, with two alcohol-free days a week. Any more than this and the beneficial effects of alcohol are lost.

In the short-term alcohol abuse can lead to headaches, dehydration, nausea, vomiting and diarrhoea, sleeping difficulties and depression.

In the long-term, heavy drinking can lead to liver disease, cancer of the oesophagus, brain damage and dementia, hypertension and stroke, diabetes, pancreatitis, impotence

cigarettes, increasing your glucose intake during the quitting period may also help ease withdrawal symptoms," says Ms Bittoun.

"You become hypoglycaemic (low levels of sugar in your blood) while you are quitting nicotine so many people find an emergency packet of jelly beans much more helpful than being told to chew on carrot sticks."

Ms Bittoun says the first two weeks of giving up smoking are crucial.

"If you can make it past that, you are more than halfway there

### How can I drink safely?

To stick to healthy limits, you need to be smart:

- Monitor how much alcohol you drink. A standard drink is 30ml of spirits, 100ml of wine, 285ml of regular beer and 375ml of low alcohol beer. If you are served a drink at a party or in a big glass, then you're probably drinking more than a standard drink
- Make sure you have appealing non-alcoholic drinks in the fridge
- Don't let people refill your glass the moment you take a sip
- Eat before or while you are drinking: eating slows your pace
- Avoid salty snacks that will increase your thirst
- Start with a soft drink to quench your thirst before you start drinking alcohol

and inflammation of the stomach lining.

Alcohol can also interfere with night vision, affect judgment and lead to falls or accidents.

Consuming just one drink a day also increases the risk of breast cancer in women by 10 per cent.

Heavy drinking has other effects, too – up to a quarter of patients taken to casualty departments with injuries are there because of drinking.

### **I need some help**

If you suspect you have a problem, keep a diary of your drinking habits and ask yourself to what extent drinking is

influencing your life. Some people find help in Alcoholics Anonymous, or other self-help organisations. Remember: the first step to dealing with the problem is recognising it, then resolving to deal with it.

## **PHARMACEUTICALS**

### **Do we take too much medication?**

Australians use a vast number of over-the-counter and prescription drugs.

In 1998, 3.3 million prescriptions were written for Temazepam alone, one of the most common sleeping tablets, and another 4 million for codeine (used for pain relief).

At the same time, Australians bought millions of over-the-counter painkillers, cough medicines and cold remedies.

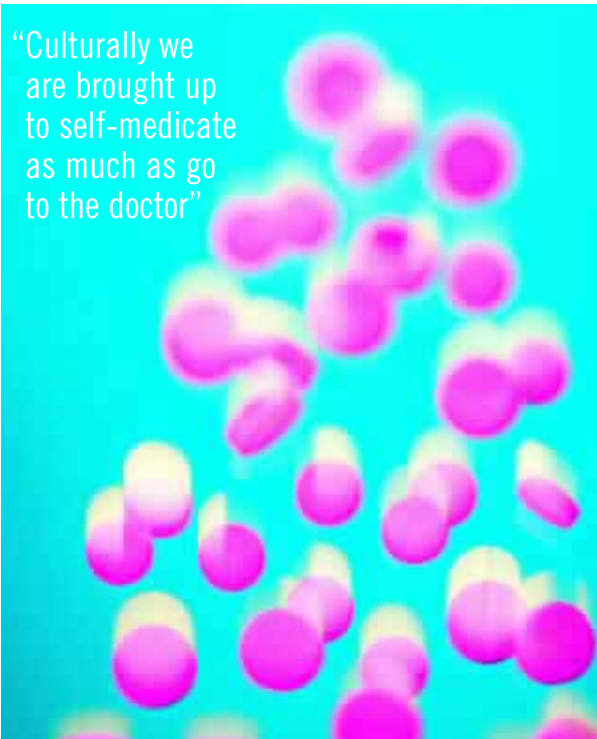
“Culturally we are brought up to self-medicate as much as to go to the doctor,” says Bill Stronach, Chief Executive of the Australian Drug Foundation.

“We are a pill-popping nation,” he says. “It creates the mindset that whenever we have a twinge, we can take a drug without thinking. If you have kids, they get into that mindset too.”

Paracetamol, under the trade names of Panadol, Tylenol, Temptra and other names, is a powerful painkiller that is sold in supermarkets.

“It is comparatively safe, except in large doses,” says John Bell, Principal Adviser to Pharmacy Self-Care, a program run by the Pharmaceutical Society of Australia.

If the dose is exceeded



“Culturally we are brought up to self-medicate as much as go to the doctor”

continuously or a huge number of tablets are swallowed, permanent damage to the liver can result.

Put paracetamol together with codeine and the result is an even more powerful drug. Codeine is a respiratory depressant and can cause constipation.

Other painkillers, such as Ibuprofen (Nurofen, ACT 3, Brufen, Actiprofen) and aspirin (Aspro Clear, Disprin, Alka-Seltzer) have gastrointestinal (relating to the stomach or intestinal tract) side effects and can cause ulcers if misused. "There are many drugs that don't mix with alcohol either," says Mr Stronach. "In fact combining them can cause damage to the liver. Yet people think one drink won't hurt."

### What you can do

Jay Hooper, President of the Australian Pharmaceutical Society, says pharmacists can play a valuable role in advising customers on the use of medicines and, importantly, on which medicines interact with others.

For example, many cough and cold preparations (anything containing pseudoephedrine) should not be taken by people who have high blood pressure and who are on medication for it.

Mr Hooper warns that people buying medication off the internet should make sure these drugs are approved by the Therapeutic Drugs Authority and they should also check with their pharmacist about the safe use of them.

Of course, knowing how to use

a drug doesn't make it risk free.

Most drugs have possible side effects that your GP or pharmacist should tell you about and, especially in the case of painkillers or tranquillisers, have the potential to be addictive.

According to the Australian Drug Foundation, the proportion of Australians using tranquillisers/sleeping pills for non-medical purposes has doubled from three per cent in 1995 to six per cent in 1998.

While the media often portrays these drugs as being used mostly by older people, surprisingly the average age at which people first use tranquillisers is 23.4 years.

The danger of high doses of benzodiazepines, the largest group of tranquillisers, is that they can cause drowsiness and over-sedation.

This is especially hazardous for people who have to operate machinery, or drive a car.

Slurred speech, impaired judgement, loss of memory, blurred or double vision and dizziness, mood swings and aggressiveness are also possible side effects; and feelings of shakiness and excitability often become evident as the effects of large doses of benzodiazepines wear off.

TRANX, an organisation that helps people who are dependent on tranquillisers, regularly advises on benzodiazepines and can offer tips on getting to sleep and reducing anxiety without medication.

### Want some advice?

#### Drug Awareness & Relief Movement

1300 656 800  
NSW (02) 9755 0596  
Vic (03) 9792 0825  
Qld (07) 3368 3822  
SA (08) 8212 2864  
WA (08) 9497 9498.

#### Alcohol and Drug Information Service

NSW (02) 9361 2111  
Vic (03) 9416 1818  
Qld (07) 3236 2414  
SA (08) 8274 3333  
WA (08) 9442 5000  
Tas (03) 9416 1818  
NT (08) 8922 8399

#### Lifeline

13 11 14 for all drugs, all states

#### QUIT

for smokers, support and information 24 hours a day, 13 18 48

#### DRUGinfo

on 131 570

#### Australian Drug Foundation

(03) 9278 8100

#### TRANX

advice on tranquillisers, anti-anxiety drugs, pain killers (03) 9889 7355

#### Useful websites:

[www.adf.org.au](http://www.adf.org.au),  
[www.ancd.org.au](http://www.ancd.org.au),  
[www.dhs.vic.gov.au](http://www.dhs.vic.gov.au)

For Member Information call **13 13 34** or log on to [www.hcf.com.au](http://www.hcf.com.au)

# directory of health services

<b>Alcohol &amp; Drug Information Services</b>	
<b>Australian Drug Foundation</b>	<b>(03) 9278 8100</b>
<b>Alcoholics Anonymous</b>	
<b>Sydney</b>	<b>(02) 9799 1199</b>
<b>Canberra</b>	<b>(02) 6249 1340</b>
<b>Melbourne</b>	<b>(03) 9429 1833</b>
<b>Adelaide</b>	<b>(08) 8346 4044</b>
<b>Hobart</b>	<b>(03) 6234 8711</b>
<b>Brisbane</b>	<b>(07) 3857 0160</b>
<b>Perth</b>	<b>(08) 9325 3566</b>

## **Alzheimer's Association**

Helpline Freecall 1800 639 331

## **Arthritis Foundation**

ACT	(02) 6257 4842
NSW	(02) 9281 1611
Queensland	(07) 3831 4255
South Australia	(08) 8379 5711
Tasmania	(03) 6234 6489
Victoria	(03) 9530 0255
Western Australia	(08) 9388 2199

## **Asthma Foundation**

NSW	(02) 9906 3233
Queensland	(07) 3252 7677
South Australia	(08) 8362 6272
Tasmania	(03) 6223 7725
Victoria	(03) 9326 7088
Western Australia	(08) 9382 1666

## **Australian Cancer Society**

ACT Cancer Society	(02) 6262 2222
NSW Cancer Council	(02) 9334 1900 or 131 120
Cancer Council of NT	(08) 8927 4888
QLD Cancer Fund	(07) 3258 2200
Anti-Cancer Foundation of SA	(08) 8291 4111
Cancer Council of Tasmania	(03) 6233 2030
Anti-Cancer Council of Victoria	(03) 9279 1111
Cancer Foundation of WA	(08) 9381 4515

## **Diabetes Australia**

ACT	(02) 6288 9830
NSW	(02) 9552 9900
Northern Territory	(08) 8927 8488
Queensland	(07) 3846 4600
South Australia	(08) 8234 1977
Tasmania	(03) 6234 5223
Victoria	(03) 9654 8777
Western Australia	(08) 9325 7699

## **Juvenile Diabetes Foundation of Australia**

ACT	(02) 6230 8225
NSW	(02) 9966 0400
Queensland	(07) 3227 1475

South Australia	(08) 8201 7666
Victoria	(03) 9696 3866
Western Australia	(08) 9426 2111

## **Domestic Violence Assistance**

National 24-hour line 1800 811 811

## **National Association for Loss and Grief**

NSW	(02) 9988 3376
Queensland	(07) 3822 2633
South Australia	(08) 8294 7811
Victoria	(03) 9331 3555
Western Australia	(08) 9321 3553
ACT	(02) 6239 7011

## **National Heart Foundation**

ACT (National Office)	(02) 6282 5744
Sydney	(02) 9219 2444
Newcastle	(02) 4952 4699
Northern Territory	(08) 8981 1966
Brisbane	(07) 3854 1696
Cairns	(07) 4031 5544
Gold Coast	(07) 5592 3039
Rockhampton	(07) 4922 2195
Toowoomba	(07) 4632 3672
Townsville	(07) 4721 4686
South Australia	(08) 8223 3144
Tasmania	(03) 6224 2722
Victoria	(03) 9329 8511
Western Australia	(08) 9388 3343

## **Poisons Information Centre**

131 126

## **Relations Australia**

NSW	(02) 9418 8800
Queensland	(07) 3217 2900
South Australia	(08) 8223 4566
Western Australia	(08) 9470 5108

## **St John Ambulance Australia**

ACT (National Headquarters)	(02) 6295 3777
NSW	(02) 9212 1088
Northern Territory	(08) 8922 6200
Queensland	(07) 3252 3450
South Australia	(08) 8274 0465
Tasmania	(03) 6223 7177
Victoria	(03) 9696 0000
Western Australia	(08) 9334 1222

## **Sudden Infant Death Association**

24-hour help line	
Sydney	(02) 9360 0099
Outside Sydney	1800 651 186