

What is alcohol related brain injury?

Alcohol related brain injury (sometimes known as ARBI) happens to your brain when you drink too much alcohol over a long period of time. The early effects are hardly noticeable. However, once it develops to a noticeable degree it may not be reversible.

Who is at risk?

If you drink six or more standard drinks on a regular basis (e.g. daily) over a period of years you are at risk of developing alcohol related brain injury.

Alcohol related brain injury can also occur with regular binge drinking. Binge drinking means drinking heavily on a single occasion, or drinking continuously over a number of days or weeks

The risk is much greater if you do not eat well and, especially if you do not have enough vitamin B1 (thiamine) in your body.

How can alcohol injure your brain?

- > Alcohol shrinks brain cells, which can make them stop working and eventually destroy them.
- > It decreases your appetite so you may not eat as often as you should.
- > It prevents the liver from properly breaking down food — this means your body does not get all the nutrition it needs, so your brain does not work as well as it could.
- > It prevents your body from using vitamins properly, especially vitamin B1 (thiamine) - which is important for many body functions, including the nervous system, muscle function, digestion and metabolism.

Possible signs of alcohol related brain injury

These are some things that may happen if you have noticeable alcohol related brain injury:

- > You have difficulty finding your way in places you do not often visit - some people can actually get lost.
- > Your memories of recent things that have happened or people you have met are hazy. For example, you have difficulty remembering people's names, and you forget appointments.

- > You find it hard to learn new things. For example, you have difficulty understanding new instructions or procedures.
- > You get angry or frustrated more easily than you used to.
- > You get confused more easily than you used to.
- > You can't work with your hands as quickly or as well as you used to.
- > Making future plans is difficult.

At first these symptoms develop slowly, but they develop more quickly as the alcohol related brain injury gets worse and may reach a point at which damage is irreversible.

These symptoms can also be due to, or happen with, other conditions such as depression, anxiety and dementia.

Alcohol related brain injury does NOT affect:

- > your ability to read and write
- > your long-term memory (unless the effects are very bad)
- > activities you have been doing for a long time such as driving a car and jobs at work, however the speed and accuracy and coordination of doing the activity will be reduced.

What do I do if I think I may have ARBI?

First – Don't panic. The effects can be reversible in the early stages. The effects may also be due to other conditions.

Talk to your doctor or a counsellor from the Alcohol and Drug Information Service (1300 13 1340). They will discuss your concerns with you and help you work out what to do.

If necessary, they may refer you to a psychologist who can do some simple tests as well as discuss strategies that can help you cope or lessen the effects of alcohol related brain injury.

Some of the effects can be reduced depending on how long you have had them and how serious they are, by doing the following:

- > Reduce, or preferably stop, your alcohol use. (Before doing this talk to your doctor because you may suffer from alcohol withdrawal symptoms if you stop or reduce suddenly. These symptoms can sometimes be very uncomfortable or even dangerous.) If you are a beer drinker and are having difficulty stopping or reducing, try drinking light beer.
- > Take multivitamins (with Zinc and magnesium) every day as well as 100 - 300 mgs of vitamin B1 (Thiamine).
- > Have at least one good meal every day.

The effects of alcohol related brain injury can take up to 12 months to lessen - if they do.

Alcohol and your body

Alcohol can also affect your liver, your heart and other important parts of your body, which can have an effect on your brain so keep in regular contact with your doctor, especially if:

- > you have been drinking alcohol regularly for some years
- > and you are more than 40 years of age.

Driving

A person with ARBI may be able to go through the motions of driving a vehicle, however their ability to multi-task, respond to emergency situations, navigate and reliably assess traffic conditions may be impaired according to the nature and extent of their ARBI. This would put them and the community at risk. If you have any doubts about a person's ability to drive, refer to the [Austroad 'Assessing Fitness to Drive'](#).

Getting help

Getting help is important because it is possible to still have a good quality of life.

Confidential telephone counselling and information is available from 8.30am to 10 pm every day from Alcohol and Drug Information Service (ADIS)
Phone: 1300 13 1340.

For more information

Alcohol and Drug Information Service (ADIS)
Phone: 1300 13 1340
Confidential telephone counselling and information available between 8.30am and 10pm every day.
www.sahealth.sa.gov.au/dassa

© Department for Health and Ageing, Government of South Australia.



www.ausgoal.gov.au/creative-commons

March 2017. DASSA:00496. Consumer reviewed.

The information in this fact sheet is a guide only and while care has been taken to ensure the material contained is up-to-date at the time of production, Drug and Alcohol Services South Australia (SA Health) accepts no responsibility for the accuracy or completeness of the material in the publication and expressly disclaims all liability for any loss or damage arising from reliance upon any information contained within it.



SA Health