

Substance use disorders are a significant problem, affecting around one quarter of Australians over their lifetime. Tobacco and alcohol are the most commonly used substances that cause veterans harm, but there are also an increasing number of veterans who abuse or are dependent on prescription medication as well as illicit substances.

Stress and other emotional problems are strongly related to substance use. At times of stress, people commonly increase their substance use in order to cope with distressing thoughts, emotions, and sleep difficulties. Unfortunately, increased substance use can end up leading to higher levels of stress.

Alcohol use

Alcohol use is a significant issue amongst the veteran population with about three in 10 veterans drinking at risky levels. Alcohol misuse has short-term risks such as unclear judgement, slower reactions and aggression. It also has long-term mental and physical health risks such as sexual dysfunction, liver problems, sleep difficulties, and mood and anxiety problems. Also, people often use alcohol to help with sleep. While it may seem a good short-term solution, heavy alcohol use interferes with the sleep cycle and quality of sleep.

The less you drink, the lower your risk of alcohol-related harm. For healthy men and women, drinking no more than 10 standard drinks per week reduces the risk of harm from alcohol-related disease or injury.

On a single occasion of drinking, the risk of alcohol-related injury increases with the amount consumed. For healthy men and women, drinking no more than four standard drinks on a single occasion will reduce risk of alcohol-related harm.

Other drug use

Use of illicit drugs is relatively common, with around one third of Australians doing so at some point in their lives. Cannabis is the most commonly used drug, followed by cocaine and ecstasy. Also common is misuse of prescription medication, especially pain medication.

Steps for managing alcohol and other drug use

Increasing motivation – It can be useful to think of the pros and cons of substance use. As with most things, there will be pluses and minuses associated with your substance use, and it can be important to consider these before attempting to reduce your substance use. Writing things down on paper is a really good way to help you make a decision about your substance use.

Goal setting – If you have decided to change, you need to consider whether your goal is to cut down or to stop completely. Your goals should be specific, achievable, and broken into steps. For example: “My goal is to reduce my alcohol intake to three standard drinks a day, reducing the amount I drink each week by one standard drink per night until I reach my goal”. Once you have identified what you want to do about your substance use, you can write yourself a contract – this is an important part of beginning and maintaining change.

Monitoring your substance use – It is really important to monitor your substance use. By doing so you will learn more about when, where, and why you use substances. Further, it will help you to keep track of your substance use, including the financial cost, and will be a good reminder that you need to limit your intake. It is also a good way to monitor your progress towards your goals.

To find out ways to manage your substance use and meet your goals (e.g. identifying strategies to help manage high risk situations that lead to substance use), see the relevant resources below.

Getting help

There are a number of evidence-based therapies available to help people better manage their substance use. Begin getting help by taking the steps outlined above and having a talk to your GP. Your GP can help determine whether you need a withdrawal management plan, or medication to assist with detox or maintaining abstinence. Your GP can also make a referral to a psychologist or psychiatrist for additional help. Effective therapies for substance use problems include:

Motivational Interviewing which can help you make decisions about your substance use.

- Cognitive Behavioural Therapy which provides skills to help reduce substance use, and manage cravings and situations that lead to substance use.
- Behavioural Couples Therapy or Family Therapy to ensure that those close to you are supportive while you are trying to tackle your substance use, especially if they use substances too.
- Contingency management which helps you stay abstinent by using a reward system. Residential programs or Therapeutic Communities can be beneficial for some people, particularly if they are dependent on their substance of choice.

Self-management resources

Alcohol resources

- A useful veteran specific resource is [The Right Mix website](#) (1800 180 868) – it includes materials such as local support contacts, and tips for changing drinking behaviour.
- Information on drinking guidelines and self-management strategies can be found at www.alcohol.gov.au.

Other drug resources

- Alcohol and Drug Foundation (www.adf.org.au) provides advice on treatment services and information on substance use. ADF can be contacted on 1300 85 85 84.