# The ‘individual responsibility’ myth

It’s that time of year when we see a flurry of public declarations and resolutions to quit or cut back on alcohol.

It usually comes in the form of social media posts declaring the intention and of people celebrating sobriety anniversaries.

These declarations are often celebrated and shared as a demonstration that others can avoid alcohol too.

We rightfully celebrate when people set or achieve a sobriety goal or milestone, because making a change when it comes to alcohol – against a backdrop of incessant alcohol company marketing and excessive availability – is so difficult.

But what do we need to do to make this change easier for people?

To make it so that drinking alcohol isn’t the norm and environments support people to be healthy, rather than make it near impossible to make these changes?

So that people who choose not to use alcohol are not treated like outliers, and every social event isn’t centered around alcoholic products?

So that our athletes are able [to compete without posing for photographs next to an alcohol company brand](https://www.smh.com.au/lifestyle/health-and-wellness/athletes-dare-to-break-the-link-between-alcohol-and-sport-so-let-s-just-do-it-20221223-p5c8jd.html)?

So that our children are not [bombarded with alcohol industry marketing while watching live sport](https://fare.org.au/action-needed-to-protect-kids-from-alcohol-ads-in-sport/), movies, or television with their families?

In Australia, alcohol use and the high level of harm it causes are accepted and normalised.

Every 90 minutes someone in Australia dies because of alcohol and every three-and-a-half minutes someone is hospitalised.

Australian Institute of Health and Welfare data shows a quarter of adults [exceed the Australian Alcohol Guidelines](https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/alcohol/alcohol-tobacco-other-drugs-australia/contents/drug-types/alcohol) – which recommend consuming no more than four standard drinks a day and ten standard drinks a week – putting them at risk of a range of health harms, including several cancers.

The Australian Bureau of Statistics revealed in October that [alcohol-induced deaths are at their highest level in a decade,](https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2022/oct/19/alcohol-induced-deaths-in-australia-at-their-highest-in-10-years-study-finds) while the latest National Drug Strategy Household Survey found that one in five Australians aged 14 and over had experience alcohol-related abuse or intimidation.

We need to tackle the harm that alcohol causes at a system level, with policy changes to support people’s health and wellbeing.

Yet there continues to be a strong focus on ‘individual responsibility’ which ignores the broader environmental factors that make alcohol almost impossible to ignore.

The ‘individual responsibility myth' is the biggest lie that we are told about alcohol, one that the companies which profit from alcoholic products promote when they include the small tagline in their marketing suggesting that people ‘drink responsibly’.

It ignores the gaping holes in regulation that allow alcohol companies to market alcoholic products relentlessly and glosses over the harm that they cause.

We live in a society where alcohol is [heavily promoted](https://fare.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020-05-08-CCWA-FARE-An-alcohol-ad-every-35-seconds-A-snapshot-final.pdf) and readily available – at your doorstop within 30 minutes, day or night, without proper checks and balances to protect people most at risk.

The rapid online sale and delivery of alcohol into Australian homes is accelerating without safeguards, putting the health and wellbeing of the community at risk.

The nation’s largest alcohol retailers have invested millions of dollars into [online sale and delivery](https://theshout.com.au/coles-liquor-online-sales-up-50-per-cent/), because they know this is where they can increase the profits through online microtargeting of people who drink at high-risk levels.

Alcohol retail sales hit an all-time high during the pandemic when drinking in the home increased, [rising by 29 per cent or $3.6 billion between January 2019 and the end of 2021](https://www.9news.com.au/national/covid19-pandemic-blamed-for-huge-increase-in-alcohol-sales-across-australia/b8da58fa-b7b8-4d81-87ef-2baee80148ca).

These companies are able to collect data on people at risk of harm from their products and target them with predatory marketing, exploiting gaping holes in regulation of online advertising.

We can reduce the harm caused by alcohol with policies that address these drivers of alcohol use and harm – and the broader social and economic contexts in which people live.

This includes introducing common sense measures like limiting the hours that alcohol is sold by online delivery, and protecting children and people who are most vulnerable from exposure to digital alcohol marketing.

By tackling the drivers of alcohol harm, we can improve the health and wellbeing of families and communities.

This would be something that we can collectively celebrate.