# Where alcohol is concerned, there’s always risk

Beer, wine, gin and tonic.

I love a drink or three on the weekends, just like the next person. It’s social and relaxing; it feels civilised and grown up. And as long as I stay in the government-recommended guidelines and count my drinks, she’ll be right, right?

Like most social drinkers, I rely on the guidelines and the standard drink indicator to know how much I have imbibed. They indicate parameters for when I am not causing myself too much harm, when I would be legally allowed to drive, and give a hint about whether I am going to feel a little dusty the next day.

The standard drink indicator is also a kind of official stamp, a tacit approval from on high that this product has been checked and counted. But what we know deep down is that there are no truly safe levels — not really. Because where alcohol is concerned, there is always risk.

As a nation, it’s time we have an honest conversation about our relationship with booze. We must accept, even as we sip and slurp, that no matter what the guidelines say, we are responsible for ourselves.

Alcohol is a diluted poison, a legal drug. It impairs cognitive function from the very first slug. These are facts, and it’s partly why we drink it.

The Australian National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) is currently wading through recommended revisions of the national alcohol guidelines for the first time in a decade.

The review was due five years ago, but was stymied by challenges and delays. The alcohol lobby, after all, is a strong and powerful mob.

The review is considering what constitutes a standard drink, and reassessing the so-called safe drinking limits for various alcoholic drinks.

The current national guidelines were drawn up in 2009, and those who helped write them drew the line at no more than a one in 100 risk of dying. It is not a very high bar: the safe water supply risk in our country is one in a million, for example.

The NHMCR alcohol committee — made up of fine medical and scientific minds — is charged with recommending guidelines that will reduce the short and long-term health risks from drinking, because even a small risk is still a risk.

And if we are really honest, we know alcohol consumption isn’t good for our health, not in the way that consuming water, fresh vegetables or the optimum amount of fibre are, anyway.

If it were, we would not gain weight or get sloppy from it. And no healthy thing I know leaves you with the kind of headache that comes with a hangover.

The World Health Organization says there no safe level of alcohol consumption and every drink you have increases your risk of cancer and health conditions such as liver disease.

Regardless, we drink because it is legal, it feels relatively safe, it is pleasurable, social, and relatively cheap.

We might no longer be as steadily booze-soaked as we once were, with three quarters of drinkers in the nation now only indulging one or two days a week, but alcohol is still writ large at social occasions.

The top 20 per cent of drinkers in Australia consume as many as eight standard drinks in a single session, or the equivalent of a bottle of wine. One in 20 drinkers indulge every day.

Around one fifth of Australians do not drink at all, but in social circles, abstainers are still presumed to be allergic, religious or recovering alcoholics — such is the standing of alcohol in our society.

For Australians, drinking goes like hand in glove with commiseration, celebration, starting something, finishing something, as well as to mark births, deaths and birthdays.

The forthcoming recommended changes to the alcohol guidelines will be received with interest by the public as much as officials.

Last year, the Australian community was invited to provide citations of relevant published studies on the health risks or benefits of alcohol consumption in general and also during pregnancy and breastfeeding. The NHMRC received a whopping 1851 references from the public.

When the report is released, we will no doubt raise a standard glass or three and contemplate our shifting boundaries.

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