FACT SHEET No. 12

EVERYONE CAN BE A LIFESAVER

Royal Life Saving
THE ROYAL LIFE SAVING SOCIETY AUSTRALIA

www.royallifesaving.com.au

ALCOHOL & WATER SAFETY

Q. Why is the combination of alcohol consumption and aquatic activities an issue?

A. In approximately 20% of all adult drownings every year, alcohol consumption is a contributing factor.

Q. Why is alcohol consumption a factor in so many drowning deaths?

A. Drinking alcohol impairs your senses, encouraging risk taking behaviour, meaning you are more likely to get into trouble. If you drink and get into the water, tired muscles and confusion from being under the influence of alcohol makes it harder to get out of trouble. Once you are in trouble, even if a friend does come to your aid, alcohol seriously reduces your chances of surviving a near drowning as resuscitation methods are less likely to work.

Q. What type of activities were undertaken when these drownings occurred?

A. People have drowned while intoxicated and involved in almost any type of aquatic activity including swimming, surfing, boating, rock fishing, sailing, walking beside the water and playing in the water

Q. What happens to my body when I consume alcohol and engage in aquatic activity?

A. There is a range of physical changes which occur when alcohol has been consumed and then an individual gets involved in aquatic activity. These include:

DISTURBANCE OF THE INNER EAR - Fluid in the ear is responsible for balance. Alcohol and a sudden change in temperature can lead to disorientation. Diving into the water is a perfect opportunity for this: all of a sudden, up becomes down.

HYPOTHERMIA - Alcohol increases blood flow to the arms and legs, even when the body would normally try to stop this to save heat loss. Fall into the water under the influence of alcohol, and hypothermia kicks in much earlier.

SPASM OF THE VOCAL CHORDS - Water in the windpipe triggers a reflex closure of the windpipe. Alcohol increases the chance that a spasm of the vocal chords will occur, snapping the airway closed. The combination of water and alcohol can lock the airway closed.

Q. How does alcohol consumption affect my behavior?

A. **LACK OF COORDINATION** - Alcohol numbs the senses, particularly sight, sound, and touch. When these senses fail, the stumbles and stutters kick in.

GREATER RISK TAKING BEHAVIOUR - The influence of alcohol removes inhibitions, leaving you more likely to take greater risks, even life threatening risks.

IMPAIRED REACTION TIME - As a depressant, alcohol reduces the rate the brain processes information. Ordinary reactions simply take longer. On the water, a quick response is vital.

IMPAIRED JUDGEMENT - Alcohol distorts your perception of risk, and your own abilities. With less accurate information pouring into the brain, you're not as well equipped to make the right decisions.

Water is an integral part of the lifestyle of many Australians, whether it be spending time in the water, on the water or around the water. Unfortunately, every year, the addition of alcohol consumption with these aquatic activities leads to a large number of drowning deaths.

Alcohol & Water CHECKLIST:

- ☐ *If you are drinking, stay out of the water*
- ☐ *If you are considering drinking, participate in aquatic activities first and then do not re-enter the water*
- ☐ *Have a substantial meal before you drink*
- ☐ *Avoid aquatic activity by yourself*
- ☐ *Avoid aquatic activity at night*
- ☐ *Avoid aquatic activity in conditions or environments that you are not familiar with*

Royal Life Saving has developed a number of fact sheets on water safety issues in Australia. Contact Royal Life Saving on:

1300 RESQ ME
(1300 7377 63)

Supported by
Australian Government
Department of Communications, Information Technology and the Arts

For further information visit **www.royallifesaving.com.au**

EVERYONE CAN BE A LIFESAVER