

YOU ARE what you do

Look at any job and you will find a unique worker health profile. A sheep shearer burns more than 5,000 calories a day whereas a desk worker struggles to burn calories above the level needed to remain conscious. Medical workers and the farming community have among the highest rates of suicide compared with other jobs. Politicians and long-haul truck drivers are among the most sleep deprived. Publicans are the most likely occupation to die of cirrhosis of the liver. The type of work you do and when and where you do it all impacts on your physical and mental wellbeing. In some industries, such as hospitality, mining and transport, alcohol is an occupational hazard.

Dr David Harris PhD looks at the complex relationship between your job, health and fitness and highlights the unique health characteristics of particular occupations and how you can turn them to your advantage for improved health, fitness and quality of life.

Work, booze and sex

Each job has its own health profile which is surprisingly stable, often over decades, despite the fact that people come and go. There is something about the industry itself that sustains the health profile of workers within it. So it is that your job affects your drinking habits. Your alcohol consumption is likely to increase if you move to a job where heavy drinking is the norm. Research shows that you are also more likely to drink heavily socialising with workmates than when you're with non-work related friends and family. Furthermore, the impact of work depends on your sex. Women who work in jobs where more than half the employees are men are more likely to drink at hazardous levels than women working in other occupations. As for men, their risk of problem drinking is not affected by gender mix.

The big drinkers

A recent study found that the heaviest drinking industry in this country, not surprisingly perhaps is hospitality. Twenty four per cent of hospitality workers drink to excess regularly - almost twice the average of the next heavy drinking industry which is mining (14 per cent). This compares with 10 per cent of the general population. Other heavy drinking occupations and industries include salespersons, construction, transport workers and advertising. Some research suggests that problem drinking is more

common among senior management than the general workforce.

Paying for drinks

Alcohol misuse costs the hospitality industry a lot. Thirty five per cent of work-related accidents and 15 per cent of work-related deaths are caused by alcohol. Furthermore, the cost of alcohol misuse in Australia is massive. Heavy-drinking employees experience twice the accident rate, five times the worker's compensation claims, six times the absenteeism rate, and far greater healthcare costs than other employees. Problem drinking accounts for 61 per cent of suicides and self-inflicted injury, 52 per cent of falls, 47 per cent of assaults, 44 per cent of fire injuries, 30 per cent of car accidents and pedestrian deaths, 21 per cent of drownings and 7 per cent of occupational injuries.

What is "hazardous" drinking?

Lots of people enjoy a drink and most can tell you that alcohol has its benefits. For example, moderate alcohol consumption reduces the risk of stroke and heart disease. Alcohol is often thought of as a social lubricant, an elixir to improve your dancing, and a magic drink that makes ugly people beautiful. On the other hand, too much alcohol can be a health hazard, causing cancer, brain and liver damage, and high blood pressure. Excessive alcohol leads to bad behaviour, accidents, injury, poor sleep, unplanned pregnancy, unhappy relationships and puts

more than 40,000 people in hospital each year. How much is too much? Approximately 10 per cent of people drink alcohol at levels considered 'hazardous' - more than four drinks per day for men (28 per week), or more than two drinks per day for women (14 per week). Binge drinking,

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defined as more than six drinks in a day for men or more than four for women, is also hazardous.

Is your job driving you to drink?

As with any health habit, your work environment can have a power influence on your drinking behaviour. What is it about your job that makes you reach for a bottle? Hospitality workers talk about using alcohol to unwind after a busy, stressful shift. Research has identified occupational risk factors for problem-drinking including easy access to alcohol, poor training and low levels of supervision, high stress and low job satisfaction, poor work environment (for example dirty or dusty), isolation from family and friends, and a culture that supports and encourages heavy-drinking.

How do you compare?

Take a minute to think about the health profile of your own industry regarding alcohol. How does it compare to the

drinking habits of people in this country? Ask yourself: "What aspects of my job influence my behaviour at work and outside of work? How does the health of people in my industry compare with others? Are there any occupational risk factors for heavy drinking in my job?"

Remember the positives

Let's not forget that work is, itself, good for your health. It puts food on the table, gives a sense of security and a reason to get up in the morning. Work creates opportunities to socialise, which is generally good for health. Work is also one of the primary means by which you acquire skills and knowledge for life-long learning, which is so important for maintaining mental health as you get older.

Next step

Steps to take if your workplace has some occupational risk factors for problem drinking:

- Raise the issue with your safety representative. Be objective, identify conditions and organizational risk factors and avoid blaming individuals

Steps to take if you think you may have a drinking problem, or are heading in that direction:

- Talk to your doctor
- Talk to your workplace counsellor or Employee Assistance Program

NEXT ISSUE: We look at how different occupations experience different profiles of pain and looks at the effects pain can have in the workplace and on your health.

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