

THE FACTS

**ALCOHOL AND
OTHER DRUGS
AND HIV**



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Alcohol and other drugs (AOD) have been part of human culture for thousands of years. They are not going away, and we need to talk about them honestly and without judgement.

For people living with HIV, the goal is not necessarily abstinence, it is safety, wellbeing, and informed choice. Knowing how to reduce harm can make a real difference to your health, your treatment, and your quality of life.

HIV AND AOD

Data from *HIV Futures 10* (the largest and longest running study of people living with HIV in Australia) paints a striking picture: 44% of people living with HIV used illicit drugs in the past year, over half drank alcohol weekly, and heavy episodic drinking was common across the group.

Yet despite **66.2% expressing concern about their own substance use, only 15% had accessed any support services in the past year**. This gap makes clear that the intersection of HIV and AOD is not a secondary issue, it demands dedicated attention and support.

HOW DOES HIV AND AOD INTERACT?

For people living with HIV, the relationship with alcohol and other drugs touches many areas of life at once. AOD and HIV can interact in ways that are medical, social, and emotional – and often all three at the same time.

- **Interactions with antiretroviral therapy** – some substances can affect liver function, interfere with how your body absorbs HIV medication, or increase side effects. Always check interactions before combining substances with your treatment.
- **Double stigma** – carrying both an HIV diagnosis and using AOD can mean facing judgement from two directions, which can make people feel they need to hide both.
- **Health professionals** – fear of judgement or disclosure can make it hard to be honest with your doctor, which can affect the care and support you receive.
- **Mental health** – AOD use can be layered with diagnosis stress, internalised stigma, or a lack of access to affirming care.
- **Sexual pressure** – peer pressure, wanting to belong, blurred boundaries, and emotional harm can all be part of the picture.

- **Power imbalance** – dynamics in sexual or social situations can affect the choices available to you.
- **Unplanned disclosure** – using AOD in social or sexual settings can sometimes lead to accidental disclosure of your HIV status.
- **Migration, culture and identity** – for many people, experiences of AOD and HIV are shaped by cultural background, identity, and migration experiences.
- **Trust in systems** – past negative experiences with healthcare or data collection can make it harder to seek support.

HARM REDUCTION STRATEGIES AND ART

Antiretroviral therapy (ART) is one of the most powerful tools for people living with HIV. Taken consistently, it suppresses the virus, protects your immune system, and supports a long, healthy life. AOD use can sometimes make staying on top of treatment more challenging – and that's okay to acknowledge. Missing doses over time can allow the virus to replicate and may reduce how well treatment works. An occasional missed dose is not a crisis. What matters most is getting back on track and talking to your healthcare provider if adherence feels difficult.

Some practical strategies:

- Keep your medication somewhere visible (when possible) and easy to access as part of your daily routine
- Use phone alarms or medication reminder apps to help stay on track
- If you know you are going into a period of heavier use, plan ahead, let a trusted friend know, or speak to your doctor or peer navigator beforehand
- Consider a weekly pill organiser so it is easy to see briefly whether you have taken your dose
- If you have missed doses, **don't panic** – simply take your next dose as scheduled and continue from there. If missed doses are becoming a pattern, speak with your doctor about treatment options or strategies that may work better for you.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Queensland Positive People (QPP)

A peer-led, community-based organisation that helps people in Queensland live well with HIV. Their website also has up to date information about HIV testing, treatment, support, and good health.

www.qpp.org.au

PALS Project

The Positive AOD Life Support (PALS) website provides co-designed resources, information, and links to support for people living with HIV who use alcohol and other drugs.

www.palsproject.org.au

QPP The Facts

Follow the link below or scan the QR code to visit the QPP 'The Facts' page containing links to all 'The Facts' booklets in multiple languages and helpful links.

www.qpp.org.au/thefacts

HIV Drug Interactions Checker:

<https://www.hiv-druginteractions.org/checker>

ADIS 24-hour AOD support line:

www.adis.health.qld.gov.au/



This booklet is adapted with permission from 'The Facts' series created by Living Positive Victoria.

