

ALCOHOL USE BY ELITE AUSTRALIAN RULES FOOTBALL PLAYERS

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The aim of the survey was to report on the intake and use of alcohol by senior players in an Australian Rules Football team.

Fifty-six Australian Rules footballers, representing the senior list of First and Reserve Teams from a club playing in the top Australian Football league participated in a study on dietary intake and food use. Players were questioned about their pattern of alcohol use during a dietary history interview. Information on alcohol intake was collected from 7-day food diaries kept by players during a normal training week. Blood samples were taken at a Sunday morning training session, following a game on Saturday afternoon and these samples were sent to a commercial laboratory (Chelmer Diagnostic Pathology Laboratory, Melbourne) for determination of blood alcohol level.

Use of alcohol during the playing season was reported by many players to be confined to weekends only. A small number of players reported regular intake of moderate amounts of alcohol during the week, with six players occasionally consuming two or three drinks as a relaxant on the night before the match. Five players (9%) described themselves as non-drinkers. For the majority of football players, the self-reported pattern of alcohol use was heavy consumption on Saturday nights after the match, and often continued on the day following. It was also reported that the frequency of heavy alcohol 'binges' was increased at the end of the season, until heavy pre-season training recommenced.

Mean daily intake of alcohol reported for the training week during which the food diary was kept, was 20 g, supplying 3.5% of total energy intake. However this intake was highly variable, with the mean alcohol intake of all players reporting alcohol use, on the heaviest day of alcohol consumption being 120 g and supplying 19% of energy intake, (range 27-368 g, 3-43% of energy intake).

Fourteen players showed a positive blood alcohol reading on the Sunday morning training session, thus reflecting a large consumption of alcohol during the previous evening. The mean blood alcohol level of this subgroup of fourteen players was 0.035 g/100ml (range 0.001-0.113 g/100 ml). Four of the players had blood alcohol levels above 0.05g/100ml, which is the legal limit for driving an automobile in Victoria.

This pattern of 'binge' drinking was regarding by many players as part of team 'bonding' and an important element of post-game relaxation. Drinking prowess is often prized and romanticised within the football community. Although the immediate and long-term effects of excessive alcohol intake on health and performance are clear, it appears that the present form of education regarding alcohol use is ineffective in this group of sportsmen.