

Media Release



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Holidaymakers + alcohol = emergency department spike for Warrnambool

As the summer break kicks in and visitor numbers at Warrnambool's camping grounds and beaches swell, so too do the number of people arriving at the hospital's emergency department with alcohol-related injuries.

A study of alcohol-related attendances at Warrnambool Base Hospital emergency reveals a fourfold increase in visitors from camping grounds, caravan parks and beaches during December and January.

This is just as many as those coming in after drinking at Warrnambool's busiest hotels and bars.

Last Drinks data collected by Deakin University researchers and emergency department staff shows most people turn up with alcohol-related injuries including fractures, eye injuries, hand wounds, dislocations, ankle and leg injuries and self-harm.

Almost all of these people are men aged 20 to 50 years, with many injuries the result of combining alcohol with bikes, skateboards and evening visits to the beach.

Warrnambool Surf Lifesaving Club Captain John McNeil says that despite a council ban on alcohol products on the beach, some people still take the risk.

Mr McNeil says while most beachgoers frown on drinking, some come to the beach after consuming alcohol products elsewhere and usually after 5:30pm when lifeguards have finished for the day.

"Campers might have been drinking in the afternoon, had a big evening meal and a few more drinks, then decide to go for a swim," he says.

"They come straight over the dunes to areas that we would not recommend swimming at any time and that would be outside the flags during the day."

Mr McNeil says spots like The Flume, Granny's Grave and the mouth of the Merri River can be particularly dangerous and the club's message this season is "if we can't see you, we can't save you."

"Most people think it's not going to happen to them. But if you do get into a bit of strife, not only do you have grog in your system, which affects your brain and muscles and how your body works, but you're also on your own because there is no one around watching you," he says.

Warrnambool City Council Manager Visitor Economy David McMahon says the council-run Surfside and Shipwreck Bay caravan parks are proving as popular as ever, with about 5000 people expected to be staying over the peak holiday period, drawn by the beach and the town's summer events calendar.

Warrnambool Police Senior Sergeant Shane Keogh says the caravan parks over summer are big social events with families returning to the same spots year after year.

But as people relax into their holiday, their guard goes down and that's when trouble can occur, with police called down weekly to deal with alcohol-related issues during this time.

"The majority of injuries we see down there are not because of assaults but as a result of people being affected by alcohol and falling off bikes and skateboards or engaging in risky behaviour like swimming after consuming alcohol, Senior Sergeant Keogh says.

He says it is also a time when young people congregate on the foreshore and drink alcohol products, with police asking parents to monitor their kids whereabouts.

"It's bred into 16-20 year-olds to take risks and this has been the case for decades, but we as parents can't afford to get lost in ourselves and lose track of our kids because they are still children," Senior Sergeant Keogh says.

"New research is coming out all the time about the affect on alcohol products on the brains and growth of children, as well as reducing their inhibition and increasing their involvement in risky behaviours."

He says that while police are operating positive patrols around the foreshore over peak times, it is up to holidaymakers to remember that more alcohol equals more harm and opt for low-risk drinking to ensure a safe break.

Last Drinks Warrnambool is part of the Driving Change trial running in emergency departments across Victoria, NSW and the ACT until 2021. As part of the project, which builds on a pilot study run in Warrnambool in 2014, hospitals gather information on alcohol-related presentations, including time and location of drinking, injuries and weapons used. The data is used to create practical ways of reducing harm from alcohol products within the community.

Warrnambool Violence Prevention Board, hopes that sharing this information with Warrnambool residents will also show alcohol is not a benign product, but one that results in a range of harms – from injury and cancer through to violent assaults.

Anyone wanting help to cut down or quit can call DirectLine confidential alcohol and drug service on 1800 888 236, Turning Point live online counselling at www.counsellingonline.org.au or contact their GP.

Available for interview:

Senior Sergeant Shane Keogh
Warrnambool Surf Lifesaving Club Captain John McNeil

Project hashtag: #LastDrinksWarrnambool **Project web site:** <http://lastdrinks.info>

Media contact

Tanya Hollis mobile: 0401 628 599 | email: tanya@tanyaholliswrites.com

Last Drinks data is collected by the Driving Change Project, which is administered by Deakin University with funding provided by the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC; APP1113693), St Vincent's Hospitals Australia and support provided by the Australasian College of Emergency Medicine. The dissemination of the Last Drinks data collected by South West Healthcare as part of the Driving Change Project is supported by VicHealth and the Warrnambool Violence Prevention Board.