

ALCOHOL AND YOUR HEALTH

INFORMATION FOR OLDER ADULTS, FAMILIES,
AND CAREGIVERS



READ THIS PAMPHLET TO LEARN:

- Safe Levels of Alcohol Consumption.
- Signs of Problem Drinking.
- Strategies to Reduce Alcohol Use.



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In Canada, about 80% of adults consume alcohol. For many, “having a drink,” is part of social life. Alcohol is at first a brain stimulant before it becomes a depressant, so for many people, having a beer, a glass of wine or a cocktail is an enjoyable addition to one’s meal or a get-together, creating a feeling of relaxation and intensifying social and emotional responses.

For some people, alcohol can become an addiction.

When drinking increased amounts of alcohol, its depressant effect kicks in. Uncontrolled drinking can damage not just your health, but also your private, social and sometimes professional life. Even when it isn’t an addiction, alcohol can lead to problem drinking.



Further, for social drinkers and alcoholics alike, the use of alcohol can cause or contribute to a range of illnesses including cancer, heart disease, diabetes and other chronic conditions. And for some, it is fatal, accounting for almost 2% of deaths in Canada.



WHAT ARE THE RISKS OF ALCOHOL USE?

Alcohol consumption presents risks to health and life expectancy. In Ontario, over 20% of adults are at risk of negative long-term impacts of alcohol.









HOW MUCH IS TOO MUCH?

A safe amount of alcohol depends on a person's body weight, size, age and whether they are male or female. Women absorb more alcohol than men, so their risk of liver damage from alcohol is higher.



Older women with healthy livers should not drink more than one alcoholic beverage a day (or five drinks in one week). Older men with healthy livers should not drink more than one to two drinks a day (or 7 drinks in one week.) Having two to three alcoholic drinks every day and binge drinking can harm your liver. Binge drinking is when you drink more than five drinks in one sitting. If you already have a liver disease, you should stop drinking alcohol.

Recommended alcoholic beverage consumption in one week

Types of Alcohol	Women	Men
BEER 12 ounces (341 ml) of beer (small can of beer)	 5 cans per week	 7 cans per week
WINE 5 ounces (142 ml) of wine	 5 glasses per week	 7 glasses per week
SPIRITS 1½ ounces (43 ml) of spirits or hard liquor (gin, rum, whiskey, others)	  5 shots per week	  7 shots per week

WHAT IS IN A DRINK?

One of the problems with calculating your level of drinking has to do with measurement. Wine, beer, spirits and cider contain different percentages of alcohol—the higher the percent, the more alcohol. It takes the body an hour to process 10 ml of alcohol. Nothing can speed up this process. The type of alcoholic drink and your size and weight are factors in determining daily limits.

In general, one drink is:



12 ounces (330 ml)
of beer
(small can of beer)



5 ounces (142 ml) of
wine



1.5 ounces (43 ml) of
spirits or hard liquor
(gin, rum, whiskey, others)

BEER

The standard size of a beer can in North America is 12 ounces (330 ml), and in Canada, beer alcohol content ranges from 4% to 6%.



WINE

The standard restaurant serving of a wine is a 5 ounce glass (142 ml), and in Canada, wine alcohol content is 12% on average.



SPIRITS

Many spirits contain up to 40% alcohol.
A standard measure is 1.5 ounces (43 ml).



HOW DOES ALCOHOL IMPACT YOUR HEALTH?

Excessive drinking is associated with many chronic health conditions, especially cancer. While alcohol presents many health risks, it has no benefit to your health. This runs contrary to the common misperception that red wine, for instance, has benefits to heart health.



The amount of alcohol you drink is important, not the kind of alcohol you drink. Some of the specific health effects and risks of alcohol abuse include:

- High blood pressure, which increases risk of heart failure, kidney damage, brain damage, and stroke
- Depression
- Liver damage
- Anemia
- Nerve damage
- Wet brain, which is a serious form of brain damage that causes lack of muscle coordination, major memory problems, hallucinations and vision impairment
- Multiple types of cancer



HOW DOES ALCOHOL IMPACT LIFE EXPECTANCY?

Alcohol consumption in general and excessive drinking in particular— lowers life expectancy. Severe alcoholism can take 10 to 12 years off your life.

HOW DOES ALCOHOL USE AFFECT MEDICATIONS?

It is dangerous to drink alcohol with prescription and over-the-counter medications, such as:

- Antibiotics
- Blood thinners
- Antidepressants
- Sedatives
- Pain medication
- Muscle relaxants



WHAT IS ALCOHOLISM?

Alcoholism, or Alcohol Use Disorder (AUD), is the uncontrolled drinking of alcoholic beverages to the point that one's health and social life are damaged. We often hear the term problem drinker, meaning a person not necessarily addicted to alcohol but who may have problems with their health or conflicts in their social or working life because of regular or binge drinking. The line between problem drinking and an Alcohol Use Disorder can be blurred.

WHAT CAN ALCOHOLISM LOOK LIKE?

Asking questions about your alcohol use can help you reflect on the role alcohol plays in your life. Ask yourself the following questions:

Asking questions about your alcohol use can help you reflect on the role alcohol plays in your life. Ask yourself the following questions:

1. Do you ever drink alone?
2. Can you stop drinking once you've started?
3. Do you think you might have a problem with alcohol?
4. Are you medicating yourself with alcohol to solve problems in your life?
5. Do you prefer to spend time with friends or co-workers who drink alcohol?
6. Has drinking ever caused you to miss work or social events?

Some symptoms of more severe alcohol use include:

- Excessive sweating
- Mood swings or depression
- Memory loss after drinking
- Erectile dysfunction
- Insomnia
- Hallucinations



If you answer yes to some of the questions above, or experience any of the symptoms above, you may benefit from examining your relationship with alcohol.

WHAT ARE TIPS TO REDUCE HOW MUCH ALCOHOL YOU DRINK?

If you want to reduce your alcohol intake, use some of these strategies:



- Write down a goal of how many drinks per week you would like to have and count your drinks throughout the week. Tell a friend or family member what your goal is.
- Measure your drinks to ensure you are always having a standard drink.
- Space out the drinks with soda or soft drinks, water or another beverage.
- Avoid “triggers”—the circumstances in which you think you drink too much. For instance, meet friends at a coffee shop instead of a bar.
- Use activities other than drinking to relax.
- Eat. Don’t rely on alcohol for your calories.
- Set alcohol-free days, weeks, months or years.
- Learn “mocktail” recipes.
- Look for low-alcohol beer or wine.



Some ways to let others know you are trying to cut back are to say:

1. I’m the designated driver
2. Thanks, I don’t feel like it just now
3. I’ve had my limit
4. I’m working later on
5. I’m getting up early



WHERE CAN I FIND MORE INFORMATION?

CANADIAN MENTAL HEALTH ASSOCIATION

Provides resources and tools on substance use, addiction and mental health.



www.toronto.cmha.ca

CANADIAN COALITION ON SENIORS MENTAL HEALTH

The Canadian Mental Health Association provides information and services for individuals who are struggling with a mental health issue and would benefit from support.



<https://ccsmh.ca/>



289-846-5383 ext. 223

CONNEXONTARIO

ConnexOntario provides free and confidential health services information for people experiencing problems with alcohol and drugs, mental illness and/or gambling. The information and referral services are available 24 hours a day.



www.connexontario.ca



1-866-531-2600

COMMUNITY OUTREACH PROGRAM IN ADDICTIONS (COPA)

The COPA program helps older adults who struggle with addictions that impact their daily lives. Services include: outreach-based treatment, seeing clients in their homes, harm reduction, and more.



<https://bit.ly/3QJbm9P>



416 248 2050

CENTRE FOR ADDICTIONS AND MENTAL HEALTH

Offers counselling services for individuals struggling with problem drinking and alcoholism, and is a source of information about addictions, management strategies and further resources.



www.camh.ca



1-800-463-2338

RELEVANT RESOURCES IN OUR SERIES

- Living Longer, Living Well – Your Guide to Healthy Ageing

ADDITIONAL HEALTH RESOURCES IN OUR SERIES:

- Advance Care Planning: How to Approach the Conversation
- Calcium, Vitamin D and Bone Health
- General Tips for Managing Memory Problems
- Improving Nutrition as You Age
- Improving Urinary Incontinence
- Managing Caregiver Stress
- Managing Chronic Pain
- Managing Common Mental Health Conditions in Older Adults
- Managing Constipation
- Managing Mild Cognitive Impairment, Alzheimer’s Disease & Other Dementias
- Managing Multiple Chronic Health Conditions
- Managing Sedative-Hypnotic Use Among Older Adults
- Managing Sleep in Older Adults
- Managing Substance Use and Addictive Disorders As You Age
- Preventing Falls at Home
- Recognizing and Managing Anxiety
- Recognizing and Managing Delirium
- Recognizing and Managing Depression
- Recognizing and Managing Hearing Loss
- Safe Medication Use for Older Adults
- Substitute Decision Makers and Powers of Attorney
- Understanding Your Palliative Care Options

ADDITIONAL COMMUNITY RESOURCES IN OUR SERIES:

- Community Transportation Options
- Driving Assessment Services
- Elder Abuse
- Funding for Mobility Aids from the Assistive Devices Program
- Housing Options for Older Adults
- How to Register for Wheel-Trans
- Meals on Wheels

Visit www.sinaigeriatrics.ca/healtheducation for additional resources for older adults, families and caregivers.

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