

# Women and Alcohol



## Alcohol

- Alcohol is widely used in Canada and is deeply embedded into our society.
- Although alcoholic drinks come in various forms (e.g., in beer, wine, rum, coolers), they all contain ethanol, thus the health effects and risks are the same regardless of the type of alcoholic drink consumed.
- Alcohol is a “depressant” drug that slows down parts of your brain that affect your thinking and behaviour as well as your breathing and heart rate.
- Many people drink alcohol for releasing tension and making them feel more at ease or outgoing.
- Drinking alcohol can also make you feel ‘drunk’ or intoxicated. Signs of being drunk include flushed skin, impaired judgment, reduced inhibition, reduced muscle control, slowed reflexes, problems walking, slurred speech, and double or blurred vision.
- Signs of being heavily intoxicated include difficulty standing, throwing up, blacking out, and having no memory of what you said or did while drinking. Heavy drinking can lead to coma and death.
- Drinking can sometimes result in a ‘hangover’ about eight to ten hours after your last drink. Symptoms can include headache, nausea, diarrhea, dehydration, shakiness, and vomiting.
- It is possible to develop a physical and psychological dependence (addiction) on alcohol.

## Canada’s Guidance on Alcohol and Health

The Guidance acknowledges that deciding to drink is a personal choice and that there is a continuum of risk associated with weekly alcohol use. The Guidance can help women think about their drinking and reduce immediate and long-term alcohol-related harms.

Some key points from the Guidance include:

- Your risk of developing several types of cancer, including breast and colon cancer, increases at 3-6 standard drinks per week.
- There are benefits to your health and wellbeing if you do not drink at all.
- When pregnant or trying to get pregnant, there is no known safe amount of alcohol use.
- No matter where you are on the continuum of risk, any reduction in alcohol use is beneficial to your health.

## Alcohol and Your Health

- Alcohol affects people differently. The way alcohol affects you depends on many factors, including:
  - Your sex, age, body weight and size, organ function and metabolism
  - Your sensitivity to alcohol
  - The type and amount of food in your stomach
  - How much and how often you drink
  - How long you’ve been drinking
  - Who you are with, where you are, and what you are doing
  - How you expect the alcohol to make you feel
  - Whether you’ve taken any other substances (e.g., cannabis, prescribed drugs, illicit substances, etc.)
  - Your family history
- There are risks of alcohol use for everyone, but alcohol affects females more negatively than males. Women experience more negative health effects earlier, after drinking lesser amounts of alcohol.
- Factors such as body size, hormonal effects and enzymes that break down alcohol result in higher blood alcohol levels and faster intoxication for women. Similar factors raise the risk of alcohol-related diseases.
- Many serious illnesses and chronic health conditions are linked to drinking, even at low levels:
  - Alcohol can cause several types of cancer, such as breast, colon, mouth and throat, larynx, esophagus, liver, and rectum.
  - Drinking alcohol can also increase your risk of stroke and heart disease.
  - Drinking is related to numerous other serious health conditions (e.g., diabetes, hypertension, epilepsy, stroke, pancreatitis, dysrhythmias and liver disease and cirrhosis).
  - Women experience more liver injury from lower levels of alcohol, compared to men.



**Beer**  
341ml (12oz.)  
5% alcohol content



**Wine**  
142 ml (5 oz.)  
12% alcohol content



**Spirits**  
(rum, gin, etc.)  
43ml (1.5oz.)  
40% alcohol content

## Alcohol and Pregnancy

- Drinking alcohol during pregnancy may result in:
  - Miscarriage or stillbirth
  - Having a low birth weight or premature baby
  - Adverse maternal outcomes, such as hypertensive disorders and placental abnormalities
  - Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD)
- FASD is a diagnostic term used to describe impacts on the brain and body of individuals prenatally exposed to alcohol. FASD is a lifelong disability. Individuals with FASD will experience some degree of challenges in their daily living, and need support with motor skills, physical health, learning, memory, attention, communication, emotional regulation, and social skills to reach their full potential.
- There is no safe time to drink alcohol during pregnancy, as the fetal brain and body develop throughout the pregnancy.
  - All types of alcohol can harm the developing fetus (e.g., beer, coolers, wine, or spirits)
  - Binge and heavy drinking are the most harmful to a fetus
- Often women drink before they are aware they are pregnant. Stopping or reducing your alcohol use as soon as possible and taking care of your nutrition and overall health are the best ways to lower the risks.
- If you have problems stopping or reducing your alcohol use while pregnant, talk to your health care provider about the support and services in your community that can help you.

**When you are pregnant, trying to become pregnant, or breastfeeding, no alcohol is safest.**

## Alcohol and Breastfeeding

- When you drink alcohol, it goes into your bloodstream and into your breast milk. Alcohol use can negatively impact suckling, your infant's sleep and may result in decreased milk production and/or stopping breastfeeding early.
- While babies are exposed to a very small amount of the alcohol through breastmilk, there is little known about the effects of alcohol on breastfeeding. Some research shows that alcohol use while breastfeeding may have negative impacts on child health and development.
- However, having an occasional alcoholic drink has not been shown to be harmful to babies. Ideally, it is best to wait for 3 hours per drink before breastfeeding (the amount of alcohol in your breast milk peaks 30-60 minutes after you drink).
- You can also pump and store breast milk in advance if you are planning to drink at levels that would result in alcohol in your milk the next time you feed your child.

## Alcohol, Parenting and Children

- Be aware of the effects of mixing alcohol and other substances when you are responsible for the safety of others. If you are planning to drink a lot, ask someone to take care of your children.
- Keep alcohol in a safe place where your children cannot reach it.
- If your child accidentally drinks alcohol, seek medical attention. Symptoms of alcohol poisoning in children include difficulty breathing, choking or vomiting, confusion or seizures, giddiness, slurred speech, or the inability to walk normally or think clearly.

### Drinking Alcohol and Staying Safe

Drinking or being around others who are drinking is also associated with experiences of violence and sexual assault. These incidents are NOT your fault. There are some things you can do to keep yourself and your friends safer. For example, if you are going out drinking, you can make decisions in advance with your friends about how much you want to drink, or how to stay in touch, and get safe transportation home. You can also help other women who may be in an unsafe situation by offering help or calling a friend to support them. Learn about what community supports may be available in your area.

## Resources and References

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