

Canada's Low-Risk Alcohol Drinking Guidelines

Frequently Asked Questions

These frequently asked questions (FAQs) were developed to assist organizations in promoting and explaining *Canada's Low-Risk Alcohol Drinking Guidelines* to clients, colleagues and networks. Although helpful to Canadians, these FAQs are not specifically targeted at the general public.

When promoting the guidelines, it is important to remember that

- these are *low-risk*, not no-risk guidelines
- the guidelines set *limits*, not targets
- the guidelines are for adults aged 25–65 who choose to drink

As we receive additional questions, we will add them and the corresponding responses to this document. If you have questions that you would like to see addressed, please contact us at alcohol@ccsa.ca.

What are *Canada's Low-Risk Alcohol Drinking Guidelines*?

This is Canada's first set of national low-risk alcohol drinking guidelines. The guidelines—intended for adults aged 25–65 years who choose to drink—provide information on how to reduce the risk of alcohol-related harms in both the short and long term.

Why do we need a national set of alcohol drinking guidelines?

Over the past 20 years there have been four sets of drinking guidelines in Canada—from the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health, the Centre for Addictions Research of British Columbia, Educ'alcool and the College of Family Physicians of Canada—resulting in Canadians receiving mixed information and guidance. A standardized set of guidelines is important to provide consistent, current information across Canada to help people make informed choices and moderate their drinking.

What are some of the health risks associated with drinking alcohol?

Average long-term alcohol use (i.e., as low as one or two drinks per day) can lead to eight types of cancers (mouth, pharynx, larynx, esophagus, liver, breast, colon and rectum). It can also lead to other serious health conditions such as seizures, pancreatitis, low birth weight, fetal alcohol spectrum disorder (FASD), stroke, irregular heartbeat, liver cirrhosis and high blood pressure.

The short-term risks during or after a specific drinking occasion include an increased risk of injuries associated with motor vehicle crashes or abusive or violent behavior, as well as other harms such as alcohol poisoning.

Why are these guidelines different from previous ones developed in Canada and those of other countries?

Canada's Low-Risk Alcohol Drinking Guidelines were informed by the most current scientific evidence. They identify daily limits where the potential health risks and health benefits exactly cancel each other out. As well, the amount of alcohol contained in a 'drink' varies among different guidelines, so a consistent and standardized definition was needed.

What do *Canada's Low-Risk Alcohol Drinking Guidelines* recommend?

To reduce long-term risks, the first guideline recommends that women should not exceed more than 10 drinks a week, with no more than two drinks a day most days. Men should not exceed more than 15 drinks a week, with no more than three drinks a day most days. Everyone should plan non-drinking days every week.

The second guideline aims to reduce the short-term risk of injury and harm from drinking alcohol. It recommends that women not consume more than three drinks, and men consume no more than four drinks, on any single occasion.

The other three guidelines identify populations (including youth and pregnant women) and situations (e.g., when driving, when taking medication) where alcohol should be avoided. Tips are provided to help further reduce the risk of alcohol-related harms. View [Canada's Low-Risk Alcohol Drinking Guidelines](#) for more information.

Why do the guidelines contain two different sets of limits?

The first set of limits is based on research related to the long-term risk of serious diseases associated with alcohol consumption, as well as the evidence of health benefits related to diabetes and some heart conditions.

The second set of limits, those for special occasions, is based on evidence related to a person's risk of harms that can happen during or after a specific drinking occasion. These harms include injuries from falls, motor vehicle crashes, or abusive or violent behavior.

In the second guideline, what is meant by "single occasion"?

Drinking at these upper levels should only happen occasionally. However, the term "occasionally" was not well-defined in *Alcohol and Health in Canada: A Summary of Evidence and Guidelines for Low-risk Drinking*. These limits are deduced from average levels of daily consumption reported in hundreds of different studies, very few of which go into this kind of subtle variation over days. As a precautionary principle, the researchers now suggest we should consider these single occasions to be special occasions that occur infrequently and certainly no more than once a week. People should always be consistent with the weekly limits specified in the first guideline.

What are the risks of drinking one's weekly limit in one night or over the weekend?

The risk of experiencing alcohol-related injuries increases with each drink. In addition to wiping out any potential benefits of light drinking, occasional heavy drinking episodes increase the risk of short-term harms such as injuries, poisoning and illnesses, as well as long-term harms such as cancers and liver diseases. The weekly limits are designed to be just that—a weekly limit, not a daily limit.

Why are the drinking limits different for men and women?

The limits are different because research shows that alcohol puts women at greater risk of certain alcohol-related illnesses (e.g., breast cancer, stroke, diabetes, high blood pressure, liver disease) than men. For example, when consuming one drink per day on average, it is estimated that a woman's risk of getting liver cirrhosis increases by 139%, compared to 26% for a man. Additionally, the risk of stroke for women is at least double the risk for men when exceeding the limits set in the guidelines.

These gender differences occur for several reasons. On average, women weigh less than men, and smaller people reach higher blood-alcohol levels than larger people. In addition, kilogram for kilogram, women have less water in their bodies than men do—even if a woman and a man of the same weight drink an equal amount of alcohol, the woman's blood-alcohol concentration will be higher. Thirdly, women have less alcohol-metabolizing enzymes and digest alcohol in their stomach differently than men.

The guidelines are a starting place for women to assess their individual drinking practices. For more information, we encourage you to read:

- BC Partners for Mental Health and Addictions Information, [Alcohol and Women](#)

Are there exceptions to the guidelines?

Canada's Low-Risk Alcohol Drinking Guidelines are intended for people 25–65 years of age. Age-specific recommendations are made below for those outside this range. The guidelines recommend abstinence for high-risk groups such as people with alcohol dependence, youth and pregnant women. They also recommend extreme caution with alcohol consumption in high-risk situations such as operating a vehicle or other machinery, making important decisions, or taking medications and/or other drugs.

- **Youth** (before age 18/19 years, depending on local alcohol laws)

The key message for youth is to delay drinking at least until their late teens. Alcohol can harm the healthy physical and mental development of children and adolescents. It is important to remember many young people choose not to drink. However, if youth decide to drink, they should do so in a safe environment under parental guidance, never have more than one to two drinks at a time, and never drink more than one to two times per week. They should plan ahead, follow local alcohol laws, and consider the safer drinking tips provided in [Canada's Low-Risk Alcohol Drinking Guidelines](#)

- **Young adults** (age 18/19 to 24 years)

From their late teens to age 24, women should never exceed two drinks per day or 10 drinks per week. Young men should never have more than three drinks per day or 15 drinks per week. Both men and women should have non-drinking days each week.

- **Older Canadians** (older than age 65)

Older Canadians should never exceed the recommendations of the guidelines: two drinks per day or 10 drinks per week for women, and three drinks per day or 15 drinks per week for men. As people get older, their bodies process alcohol more slowly so they may become more sensitive to the effects of alcohol, which can place them at increased risk of accidents, falls and the worsening of some health issues. Also, many older Canadians have multiple prescriptions and the guidelines recommend avoiding alcohol while taking medications.

For more information, please refer to:

- o Centre for Addiction and Mental Health, [Responding to Older Adults with Substance Use, Mental Health and Gambling Challenges](#)

- **Pregnancy**

Alcohol in the mother's bloodstream can harm a developing baby. There is no threshold of alcohol use in pregnancy that has been definitely proven to be safe. Therefore, the best advice to give a woman who is pregnant (or planning to become pregnant) is that the safest choice is to drink no alcohol at all and that they should speak with their healthcare provider about any alcohol use.

For more information, please refer to:

- o BC Partners for Mental Health and Addictions Information, [Alcohol and Pregnancy](#)
- o Motherisk (The Hospital for Sick Children), [Alcohol and Pregnancy](#)
- o Best Start, [Alcohol and Pregnancy](#)
- o Best Start, [Mocktails for Mom](#)
- o Society of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists, [Consensus Clinical Guidelines on Alcohol Use and Pregnancy](#)

- **Breastfeeding**

Mothers who are breastfeeding should be advised to not drink alcohol right before 'meal time', as alcohol passes into the breast milk and affects the baby. Alcohol may affect the infant's short-term sleep patterns and gross-motor development. Alcohol can also alter the milk let-down reflex and decrease the amount of milk consumed by the infant. Breastfeeding women who plan to drink alcohol should be informed that there are things they can do to make sure the alcohol doesn't reach their babies, such as pumping breast milk or breastfeeding before drinking alcohol.

For more information, please refer to:

- o Motherisk (The Hospital for Sick Children), [Breastfeeding](#)
- o Best Start, [Drinking Alcohol While Breastfeeding](#)
- o Centre for Addiction and Mental Health, [Is It Safe for My Baby?](#)

- **Driving or operating machinery**

While the legal blood-alcohol concentration limit is set by the law, the safest option is to not drink before driving or operating a motor vehicle. Operating any kind of vehicle, tools or machinery requires coordinated mental and physical skills. Alcohol interferes with and reduces a person's ability to perform these skills, increasing the risk of crashes and other negative health outcomes. Before drinking any alcohol, people should plan ahead for a safe ride home, including a designated driver who has not been drinking, taxi or public transportation.

- **Medications**

The combination of alcohol and medications, including over-the-counter drugs, can result in serious harms or even death. Alcohol can make medications less effective; it can also impact the body's ability to process them, making them overly strong. Anyone who is considering drinking while taking prescription or over-the-counter medications should always check for warnings on the packaging, and consult their physician or pharmacist to see whether alcohol should be avoided entirely.

- **Other legal and illegal drugs**

Combining alcohol and other drugs can result in serious harms, even death, and should be avoided.

- **Physical or mental illnesses**

The effects of alcohol on people with physical or mental illnesses are much greater with some conditions than others. Alcohol may impact the disease process or the medications. Alcohol affects a person's risk for developing many health conditions. For example, at even one drink per day over a period of time, a person's risk for any one of several different types of cancer increases dramatically. People should consult their healthcare provider to determine whether or not it is safe for them to drink alcohol and, if so, at what levels in light of their health condition and risk status.

- **Alcohol dependence**

When a person is severely dependent on alcohol, complete abstinence is generally recommended. Signs of alcohol dependence include needing to drink more alcohol to get the same effect, feeling unable to restrict drinking to one or two drinks, and feeling anxious or shaky the morning after drinking heavily.

Given that there are some health benefits related to alcohol, should people drink to the limits each week?

The guidelines set limits, not targets; they don't prescribe an amount to drink. People should not increase (or maintain) drinking to the upper limits, as health benefits are greatest at up to one drink per day. Moderate alcohol consumption (i.e., approximately one drink per day) appears to provide some protection for men and women over 45 years of age against diabetes and some forms of heart disease. However, as the amount of alcohol consumed in a day increases, so too does the risk of a wide range of physical and mental illnesses, including a number of cancers, liver disease and depression. Drinking in excess of the recommendations contained in the guidelines (e.g., more than two drinks for women and more than three for men) cancels any health benefits.

If someone drinks at levels higher than those in the guidelines, is he/she an alcoholic?

No. Alcohol dependence is a complex and serious health condition. If you are worried about the drinking habits of someone close (or yourself), consult with a doctor. For further information on this and where to find additional resources, consult the [Canadian Treatment Services](#) page on the Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse's website. You may also refer to *Evaluate Your Drinking* by the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health.

How can our organization officially support Canada's Low-Risk Alcohol Drinking Guidelines?

Please email alcohol@ccsa.ca with the subject line: *We'd like to become official supporters of Canada's Low-Risk Alcohol Drinking Guidelines.*

How often will the guidelines be updated?

Canada's Low-Risk Alcohol Drinking Guidelines are based on the best evidence available in late 2010. The Expert Advisory Panel on behalf of National Alcohol Strategy Advisory Committee will review the guidelines at regular intervals and in light of emerging evidence.

Reference:

Butt, P., Beirness, D., Gliksman, L., Paradis, C., & Stockwell, T. (2011). *Alcohol and health in Canada: A summary of evidence and guidelines for low-risk drinking*. Ottawa, ON: Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse.

Suggested citation:

Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse. (2012). *Canada's low-risk alcohol drinking guidelines: Frequently asked questions*. Ottawa, ON: Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse.

Ce document est également disponible en français sous le titre :

Directives de consommation d'alcool à faible risque du Canada - Foire aux questions



Canadian Centre
on Substance Use
and Addiction

Evidence. Engagement. Impact.

Developed on behalf of the National Alcohol Strategy Advisory Committee

ISBN 978-1-77178-018-6

© Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse, 2013