Guidelines for Healthcare Providers to Promote Low-Risk Drinking Among Patients

This version of Canada’s Low-Risk Alcohol Drinking Guidelines is for healthcare providers, and is intended to reduce alcohol-related harms through screening, brief intervention and/or referral to specialized services.

Note: Canada’s Low-Risk Alcohol Drinking Guidelines are not intended to encourage people who choose to abstain (for cultural, spiritual or other reasons) to drink, nor are they intended to encourage people to start drinking to achieve health benefits. People of low body weight or who are not accustomed to alcohol are advised to consume below the maximum limits.

These guidelines apply to adults aged 25–65 years.

For these guidelines, “a drink” means:

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

- Cider/Cooler
  - 341 ml (12 oz.)
  - 5% alcohol content

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

- Distilled Alcohol
  - (rye, gin, rum, etc.)
  - 43 ml (1.5 oz.)
  - 40% alcohol content
Guideline 1

Reducing the risk of long-term alcohol-related harms

These recommended drinking limits aim to reduce long-term health risks.

Guideline 2

Reducing the risk of short-term alcohol-related harms

These recommendations aim to reduce short-term risks.

Women

0–2 standard drinks per day

No more than 10 standard drinks per week

Advise patients:
- to have some non-drinking days per week to minimize tolerance and habit formation
- not to increase drinking to the upper limits because health benefits are greatest at less than 1 drink per day
- not to exceed the daily limits specified below
- that adults with reduced tolerance (whether due to low body weight, being under the age of 25, being over the age of 65, or not being accustomed to drinking alcohol) are advised to never exceed these upper limits

Healthcare providers should refer to Communicating Alcohol-Related Health Risks to apply individual risk assessment to population-based guidelines.

Men

0–3 standard drinks per day

No more than 15 standard drinks per week

Women

No more than 3 drinks in one day

Advise patients:
- their risk of injury increases with each additional drink in many situations
- drinking at these upper levels should only happen occasionally and always be consistent with the weekly limits specified above
- to drink with meals and not on an empty stomach
- to have no more than 2 standard drinks in any 3-hour period
- to alternate with caffeine-free, non-alcoholic drinks
- to avoid risky situations and activities

Men

No more than 4 drinks in one day
Guideline 3
Contraindications
Patients should abstain from alcohol in these situations.

Guideline 4
When pregnant or planning to be pregnant or about to breastfeed

Advise patients to abstain from alcohol when:
- operating any kind of vehicle, tools or machinery
- using medications or other drugs that interact with alcohol
- engaging in sports or other potentially dangerous physical activities
- working
- making important decisions
- pregnant or planning to be pregnant
- about to breastfeed
- responsible for the care or supervision of others
- suffering from serious physical illness, mental illness or alcohol dependence

Advise patients:
- the safest option during pregnancy or when planning to become pregnant is to not drink alcohol at all
- alcohol in the mother’s bloodstream can harm the developing fetus: while the risk from light consumption during pregnancy appears very low, there is no threshold of alcohol use in pregnancy that has been definitively proven to be safe
- mothers who are breastfeeding should not drink alcohol right before the baby’s meal time, as a proportion of the alcohol consumed passes into the breast milk and may affect the baby
- women who plan to drink alcohol can prevent or limit alcohol from reaching their babies by breastfeeding or pumping breast milk before drinking alcohol

Healthcare providers should refer to Alcohol Use in Pregnancy Consensus Clinical Guidelines for more information.

Guideline 5
Alcohol and young people

Advise patients that alcohol can harm healthy physical and mental development of children and adolescents.

For youth (up to age 18 or 19 years), advise patients that:
- many youth do not drink
- they should delay starting to drink until they are 18 or 19 or older
- if they have decided to start drinking, drinking should occur in a safe environment, under parental guidance and at low levels (i.e., 1–2 standard drinks just once or twice per week)

For young adults (age 18/19 to 24), advise patients that:
- from legal drinking age to 24 years, women should never exceed 2 drinks per day and men should never exceed 3 drinks in one day
Please share this public version of Canada's Low-Risk Alcohol Drinking Guidelines with your patients.

Additional details may be found in the scientific document that formed the evidence-base for these guidelines: Alcohol and Health in Canada: A Summary of Evidence and Guidelines for Low-Risk Drinking

References