



## Women and Alcohol

The Low-Risk Alcohol Drinking Guidelines (LRDGs) are based on research and were created to provide Canadian women and men with recommendations for alcohol consumption that could limit their health and safety risks. People might believe that alcohol affects men and women in the same way. However, women often drink differently than men and for different reasons. Women need to know the research that tells us the female body is more sensitive to alcohol.

### Why Are the Guidelines Different for Women and Men?

Women are generally more vulnerable to the effects of alcohol because:

- On average, women weigh less and people who weigh less reach higher blood alcohol levels compared to people who weigh more.
- Women have more adipose tissue (fat), causing alcohol to be absorbed more slowly and the effects of alcohol to take longer to wear off.
- Women have less water in their bodies to dilute alcohol. If a woman and a man of the same weight drink an equal amount of alcohol, a woman's blood alcohol concentration will be higher.
- Women have lower levels of the enzymes that break down alcohol. This lower level of enzymes means that alcohol remains in a woman's system longer.

74% of Canadian women aged 15 and older reported drinking in 2012:

- 16% of these women exceeded the long-term health risk guidelines
- 10% of these women exceeded the acute risk guidelines

### Low-Risk Drinking Guidelines for Men and Women

To reduce long-term health risks, the LRDGs recommend:

- Women consume no more than 10 drinks a week and no more than two drinks a day most days; and
- Men consume no more than 15 drinks a week and no more than three drinks a day most days.

To reduce the risk of injury and harm, the LRDGs also recommend that:

- Women consume no more than three drinks on any single occasion and stay within weekly limits; and
- Men consume no more than four drinks on any single occasion and stay within weekly limits.

Remember, these numbers are upper limits for low-risk drinking, not goals.





## The Impact of Alcohol on Women’s Health and Well Being

As drinking increases, alcohol-related health risks increase more rapidly for women than for men. These risks are discussed in the following paragraphs.

### Illness

Drinking at levels above the recommendations in the LRDGs can lead to a wide range of long-term health problems, including alcohol dependence and chronic disease. Women are more susceptible to alcohol-related heart disease and the risk of stroke is at least double the risk for men when they exceed the limits set in the LRDGs. As well, women who drink alcohol are more likely to develop alcoholic hepatitis than men, and alcohol consumption can increase the chances of developing certain types of cancer. If a woman has a family history of alcohol-related chronic disease, such as breast cancer, the recommended daily and weekly limits are lower than two and 10 drinks.

### Medications

Lower limits also apply if a woman is taking medication, as the interaction between alcohol and certain prescriptions can be dangerous. For instance, mood-altering drugs (e.g., anti-depressants, anti-anxiety drugs, pain relievers) interact with alcohol to increase the risks for harmful outcomes, such as worsening symptoms of an illness or increases in blood pressure. Women are more likely than men to be prescribed such medications.

### Pregnancy and Breastfeeding

There is no known safe level of alcohol use during pregnancy, so it is safest for a woman not to drink when pregnant or planning to become pregnant. If women of child-bearing ages consistently drink within the limits of the LRDGs, it can be easier for them to abstain from alcohol when they are considering pregnancy or when they become pregnant. Drinking at a level that exceeds the LRDGs, especially binge drinking, should be particularly avoided when pregnant, as this can cause significant harm to a developing fetus. Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) is a lifelong developmental disability that can result when a baby has been exposed to alcohol in the womb.

Exposing an infant to alcohol through breastfeeding can result in sedation and motor skill impairment in the child. It is best for women who are breastfeeding to avoid drinking, but if they decide to consume alcohol, it is recommended that they wait at least two hours per drink before nursing. For example, if a woman consumes two alcoholic drinks, she should wait at least four hours before breastfeeding.



## Social Well-Being and Safety

Experiences of violence, family and inter-personal problems, financial problems, unplanned sex, unintended pregnancy and work or school-related problems are common harms associated with drinking. Women are particularly at risk of experiencing gender-based violence. Drinking by both women and men can affect judgment and the ability to evaluate risk, and therefore increases women's vulnerability to aggression, date rape, violence and sexual assault.

## Does Age Matter?

Alcohol-related problems can develop at lower consumption levels in older women than in older men, and older women are more likely than younger women to have negative issues with the interaction of alcohol and medications. The research used to determine the LRDGs did not include the risks for illnesses for individuals over the age of 70, so both older women and older men should drink below the limits that are recommended for adults in general. There are other age-related issues: women aged 45 and older can experience some health benefits from low alcohol consumption for certain conditions (e.g., lower risk of hemorrhagic and ischemic stroke, diabetes), while also increasing their risks of other health concerns (e.g., certain forms of cancer, liver cirrhosis).

## Take Home Message

Women need to know that alcohol affects them differently than men, and that it is safest not to consume alcohol when pregnant. To be low risk, women need to keep within the single-day and weekly limits for their sex and remember that even drinking within the LRDGs does not mean there is no risk to drinking.

It is impossible to provide drinking guidelines for every disease and circumstance, as these depend on each person's risks for those conditions. Women concerned about alcohol-related conditions should drink less than the limits recommended in the LRDGs.

Women can consult their healthcare providers to understand the impact of their drinking habits. Not drinking alcohol at all might be the healthiest choice for some women.

## Additional Resources

- [Canada's Low-Risk Alcohol Drinking Guidelines](#)
- [Canadian Alcohol and Drug Use Monitoring Survey 2012](#)
- [CanFASD](#)
- [Motherisk](#)
- [National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism: Alcohol and Sexual Assault](#)
- [Cancer and Alcohol \(LRDG Summary\)](#)
- [Youth and Alcohol \(LRDG Summary\)](#)

Developed on behalf of the National Alcohol Strategy Advisory Committee  
ISBN 978-1-77178-098-8

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CCSA activities and products are made possible through a financial contribution from Health Canada. The views of CCSA do not necessarily represent the views of the Government of Canada.