



Alcohol Consumption and Adherence to *Canada's Guidance on Alcohol and Health*

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Introduction

This report breaks down the average alcohol consumption of people in Canada. It does this by drawing on findings from the Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction's (CCSA) release of *Canada's Guidance on Alcohol and Health* (CGAH) (Paradis et al., 2023), which is an update on what was previously called *Canada's Low-Risk Alcohol Drinking Guidelines* (Butt et al., 2011).

CGAH Risk Zones

CGAH aims to increase awareness of the risks associated with alcohol use and recommendations that people living in Canada consider reducing their drinking. CGAH also outlines four risk zones for different levels of average weekly alcohol consumption.

It is important to understand which risk zone we fall in on CGAH's spectrum of risk associated with alcohol consumption illustrated in Figure 1. This awareness enables us to assess alcohol's impact on our physical health and overall well-being.

CGAH's risk zones also provide experts a new way to study alcohol use in Canada. By analyzing survey responses about alcohol and substance use, like those to the 2019 Canadian Alcohol and Drug Survey (CADS) and alcohol sales statistics, it is possible to peg total alcohol consumption in Canada and gain insights into how drinking patterns compare to the risk zones.

If overall alcohol consumption significantly exceeds CGAH's risk zone limits, it may indicate a need for Canada's population to reduce their drinking.



Figure 1: Infographic of *Canada's Guidance on Alcohol and Health's* risk zones

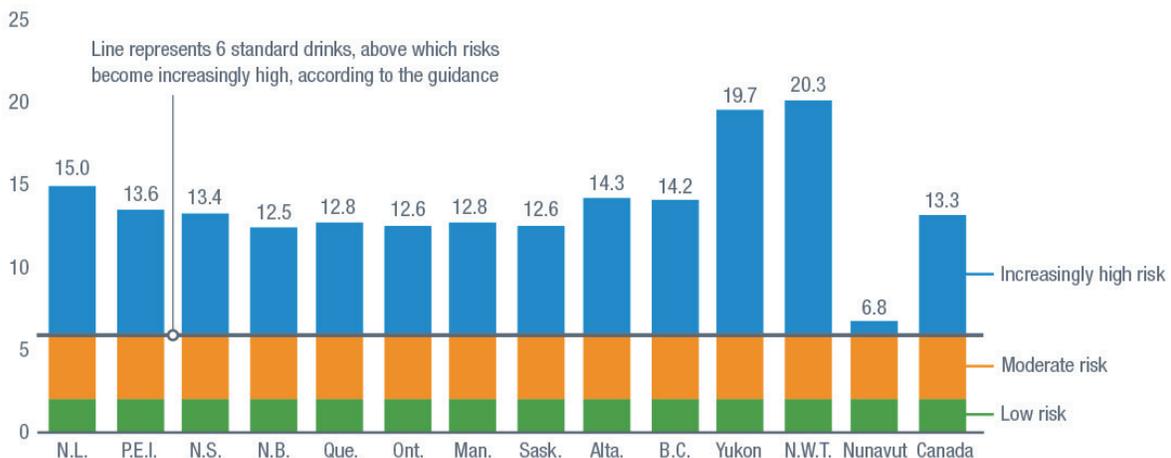


Refer to [Appendix A](#) for an accessible version of this figure.

How Much Alcohol Do People in Canada Drink Per Week?

Figure 2 presents the average weekly alcohol consumption of people in Canada aged 15 years and older who drink. The data are divided by province and territory, and Canada as a whole, in units of standard drinks per week (SD/week) (Sherk, 2024). In Canada, a standard drink is 17.05 millilitres or 13.45 grams of pure alcohol.

Figure 2: Average weekly alcohol consumption of people who drink aged 15 years and older in Canada



Refer to [Appendix B](#) for an accessible version of this figure.



The graph illustrates the weekly average alcohol use in each jurisdiction in three colours: Green for up to two drinks per week, orange for up to six drinks per week and red for any consumption beyond that. These colours correspond to CGAH's risk zones and illustrate how average weekly alcohol use, by province and territory, compares to them.

In Canada, individuals aged 15 and older who consume alcohol use an average of 13.3 SD/week – nearly two drinks every day. This is more than double the upper limit of the moderate-risk zone, which is defined as 3 to 6 SD/week.

Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Quebec, Ontario, Manitoba and Saskatchewan all report a weekly average alcohol use similar to the national average of 13 SD/week.

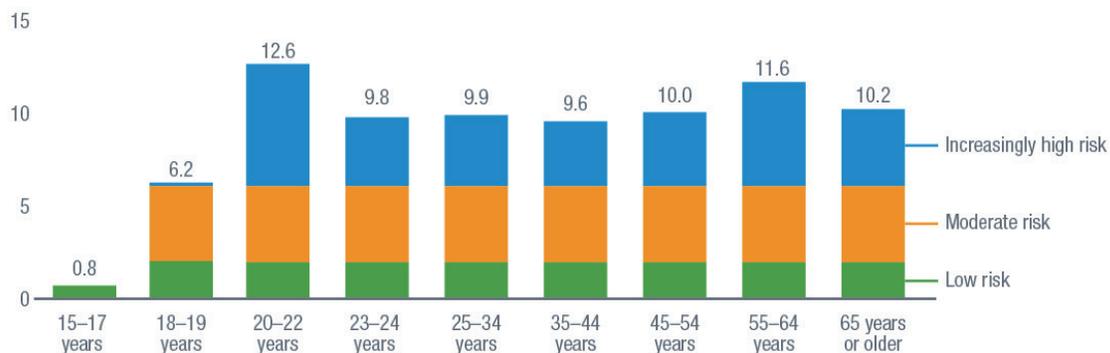
Northwest Territories and Yukon both report an average alcohol consumption of 20 SD/week – the highest weekly use per person who drinks.

Newfoundland and Labrador (15 SD/week) and British Columbia, Alberta and Prince Edward Island (all 14 SD/week) show the highest weekly alcohol consumption among people who drink (Sherk, 2024).

Nunavut has the lowest level of recorded weekly alcohol consumption (7 SD/week), although this may be underestimated due to difficulties capturing alcohol sales across Canada's North.

Average alcohol use by age group is shown in Figure 3. On average, and including people who do not drink, 15- to 17-year-olds use little alcohol: Less than 1 SD/week. Upon nearing or reaching the age of majority, average alcohol use increases rapidly: 6 SD/week among 18- to 19-year-olds and 13 SD/week for 20- to 22-year-olds, which is the highest alcohol use of any age group. Average use then declines modestly and levels off at about 10 SD/week for all remaining ages, save for a secondary peak of 12 SD/week among 55- to 64-year-olds.

Figure 3: Average weekly alcohol consumption among people 15 years and older, Canada 2019



Refer to [Appendix C](#) for an accessible version of this figure.

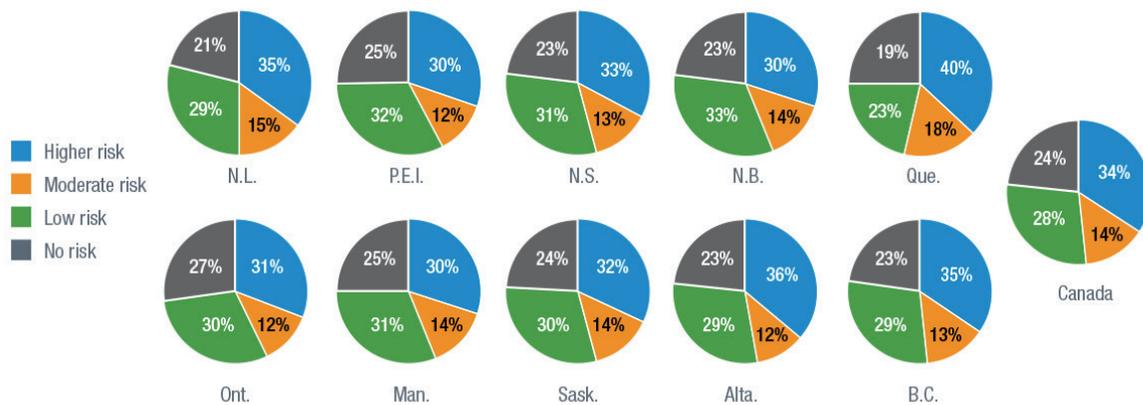


Do People in Canada Follow CGAH?

Adherence to CGAH was assessed for each CADS respondent by comparing their average sales-adjusted weekly alcohol use to the risk zones defined in CGAH.

Figure 4 below shows Canada's adherence to CGAH by province (CADS does not include territorial results) and the country as a whole.

Figure 4: People in Canada's adherence to *Canada's Guidance on Alcohol and Health* by province and Canada as a whole



Refer to [Appendix D](#) for an accessible version of this figure.

In Canada, an estimated 24% of the population aged 15 years and older did not drink any alcohol in the past year, putting them in the no-risk zone; 28% were in the low-risk zone, 14% were in the moderate-risk zone and just over one third (34%) were in the increasingly high-risk zone.

Quebec reported the highest percentage of respondents in the increasingly high-risk zone (40%), followed by Alberta (36%), British Columbia (35%), and Newfoundland and Labrador (35%). New Brunswick and Prince Edward Island (both 30%) and Ontario (31%) had the lowest percentage of respondents in the increasingly high-risk zone.

We can also compare the percentage of respondents drinking alcohol at no-risk or low-risk levels (2 SD/week or fewer) with the percentage of respondents drinking at moderate or increasingly high risk (more than 2 SD/week).

In Canada, this division is even, as 52% reported drinking in the no or low-risk zone, while 48% reported drinking associated with moderate or high risk.

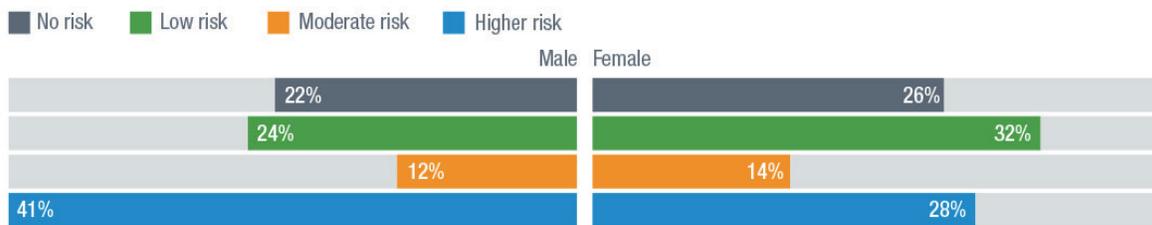
Prince Edward Island (57%) had the highest percentage of respondents reporting drinking associated with no or low risk, followed by New Brunswick, Ontario and Manitoba (all 56%).



Quebec (43%) and Newfoundland and Labrador (49%) were the only provinces where a minority of respondents reported drinking associated with no or low risk.

When the risk zones of respondents are broken down by sex, as is shown in Figure 5, substantial differences in CGAH adherence emerge. A substantially higher percentage of males (41%) falls into the high-risk zone, as compared to females (28%). Conversely, 58% of females reported drinking in the no-risk (26%) or low-risk (32%) zones, a contrast to the 46% of males who do so (22% no risk, 24% low risk).

Figure 5: Canada's adherence to *Canada's Guidance on Alcohol and Health* by sex



How Did We Answer These Questions?

Information about Canada's total alcohol consumption in 2020 was sourced from Sherk (2024), which provides a detailed description of the calculation methods.

To analyze Canada's adherence to CGAH, public data from Health Canada's 2019 CADS (Statistics Canada, 2022) was used. The survey's 10,293 respondents aged 15 years and older across the ten provinces shared how often and how much they drank over the past year. Responses were used to estimate each participant's average weekly alcohol use.

As self-reported alcohol use is known to be underreported (e.g., Livingston & Callinan, 2015), a correction factor was applied to self-reported answers to match alcohol sales data from Statistics Canada.

Conclusion

In addition to providing guidance to people in Canada about alcohol consumption, CGAH provides a new way to view, analyze and address alcohol consumption in Canada. This view extends to both individual drinking patterns – categorized by CGAH risk zones – and the relationship between population-level alcohol consumption and the guidance.

What We Found

As a whole, people who drink alcohol in Canada consume an average of more than 13 SD/week, which far exceeds amounts associated with low risk (1–2 SD/week) or moderate risk (3–6 SD/week).



There is a wide spectrum of alcohol use at the individual level. For example, a slim majority of people aged 15 and older in Canada (52%) reported drinking associated with either no or low risk, while about one third of people (34%) reported drinking at high-risk levels. This high-risk percentage was substantially higher for males (41%) than females (28%).

What Does this Mean?

As a result, people who use alcohol in Canada experience substantially more health risks, including alcohol-related deaths and an increased likelihood of developing cancer, liver diseases, cardiovascular diseases, lower respiratory infections, as well as a greater incidence of injuries from violence and road crashes, compared to people who consume less alcohol.

Recommendations

To bring alcohol use in Canada to levels associated with improved health and well-being, the World Health Organization recommends several alcohol policy best buys (Chisholm et al., 2018; World Health Organization, 2022). These include pricing policies like excise taxation and minimum unit prices, as well as restrictions on alcohol availability (number of outlets and hours of sale) and alcohol marketing. As well, alcohol container labelling can educate people about alcohol-caused harms such as cancer, heart disease and stroke, which are not yet well known among people who drink (Hobin et al., 2020).

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Appendices

Appendix A: Infographic of Canada's Guidance on Alcohol and Health's risk zones

Four circles show the risk levels for the number of drinks per week a person consumes and related information.

The text in the first circle reads 0, no risk, 0 drinks per week. Not drinking has benefits such as better health and better sleep.

The text in the second circle reads 1 to 2, low risk, 1 to 2 standard drinks per week. You will likely avoid alcohol-related consequences for yourself and others. Below it are icons for a glass of beer and a glass of wine.

The text in the third circle reads 3 to 6, moderate risk, 3 to 6 standard drinks per week. Your risk of developing several different types of cancer, including breast and colon cancer, increases. Below it are six icons for various alcoholic beverages.

The text in the fourth circle reads 7+, increasingly high risk, 7 or more standard drinks per week. Your risk of heart disease or stroke increases. Below it are seven icons for various alcoholic beverages.

Return to [Figure 1](#).



Appendix B: Average weekly alcohol consumption of people who drink aged 15 years and older in Canada

Province or territory	Low risk	Moderate risk	Increasingly high risk	Total (SD/wk)
Newfoundland and Labrador	2	4	9.0	15.0
Prince Edward Island	2	4	7.6	13.6
Nova Scotia	2	4	7.4	13.4
New Brunswick	2	4	6.5	12.5
Quebec	2	4	6.8	12.8
Ontario	2	4	6.6	12.6
Manitoba	2	4	6.8	12.8
Saskatchewan	2	4	6.6	12.6
Alberta	2	4	8.3	14.3
British Columbia	2	4	8.2	14.2
Yukon	2	4	13.7	19.7
Northwest Territories	2	4	14.3	20.3
Nunavut	2	4	0.8	6.8
Canada	2	4	7.3	13.3

Note. SD/week = standard drinks per week.

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Appendix C: Average weekly alcohol consumption among people 15 years and older, Canada 2019

Age	Low risk	Moderate risk	High risk
15 to 17 years	0.8	0.0	0.0
18 to 19 years	2.0	4.0	0.2
20 to 22 years	2.0	4.0	6.6
23 to 24 years	2.0	4.0	3.8
25 to 34 years	2.0	4.0	3.9
35 to 44 years	2.0	4.0	3.6
45 to 54 years	2.0	4.0	4.0
55 to 64 years	2.0	4.0	5.6
65 years or older	2.0	4.0	4.2

Return to [Figure 3](#).



Appendix D: People in Canada's adherence to Canada's Guidance on Alcohol and Health by province and Canada as a whole

Province	Increasingly higher risk	Moderate risk	Low risk	No risk
Newfoundland and Labrador	35.3%	15.4%	28.8%	20.5%
Prince Edward Island	30.4%	12.1%	32.2%	25.3%
Nova Scotia	33.2%	12.9%	30.7%	23.2%
New Brunswick	29.6%	14.1%	33.5%	22.9%
Quebec	39.7%	17.6%	23.3%	19.4%
Ontario	31.2%	12.4%	29.9%	26.6%
Manitoba	29.8%	14.3%	31.3%	24.5%
Saskatchewan	32.0%	14.1%	30.1%	23.8%
Alberta	36.4%	11.5%	28.7%	23.5%
British Columbia	35.1%	13.5%	28.5%	22.9%
Canada	34.3%	13.8%	28.2%	23.7%

Return to [Figure 4](#).

About CCSA

CCSA was created by Parliament to provide national leadership to address substance use in Canada. A trusted counsel, we provide national guidance to decision makers by harnessing the power of research, curating knowledge and bringing together diverse perspectives.

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