

ALCOHOL

FACT SHEET



Alcohol is a depressant drug that slows down the central nervous system. When a person drinks a beer or cocktail, the alcohol (or ethanol) in the drink is absorbed into their bloodstream through the stomach. It is then transported to the brain and other organs, and is at last broken down by the liver.

The number of drinks a person consumes determines both their blood alcohol content (BAC) and the way their body responds to the substance. Other factors include gender, age, weight, racial origin, and drinking experience. For example, women have less water in their bodies to dilute alcohol, so they usually become intoxicated faster than men. Alcohol also has a stronger effect on teens and elderly people.

Why do people use alcohol?

Many people drink in celebration of a significant event or special occasion. Whether it's a glass of champagne to ring in the New Year, or a bottle of wine at a wedding reception, alcohol often plays an important role in human festivities.

Some people enjoy drinking alcohol because it's relaxing and produces the feeling of euphoria. And many social drinkers are simply fond of the taste of their favourite alcoholic beverages.

For people who are shy or suffer from other social barriers, alcohol serves to lower their inhibitions and helps them become more sociable. For young people, drinking is a way to let off steam and have fun with friends.

Alcohol is useful as a pain reliever for some people. For others, the substance offers temporary escape from mental pressure or stress. Sometimes people suffering from depression turn to alcohol for comfort and relief.

There are also some people in society who drink regularly because they are dependent on alcohol and need the substance to cope with their daily lives.



About 10% of British Columbians admit their alcohol use has caused them some form of harm—be it physical, social, financial, or legal.

How does alcohol affect a person?

After having one or two drinks, most people feel more relaxed and have an increased sense of well-being. However, even light drinking can affect a person's coordination, speech, balance, and vision, even though they may not feel drunk.

Consuming three or four drinks at one time can significantly impair a person's judgment, motor skills, and ability to estimate distances.

Drinking to the point of intoxication (four or more drinks in one sitting for women, and five or more for men) causes severe impairment to a person's mental and motor functions. A night of risky or hazardous drinking may end in a person vomiting or suffering from respiratory depression, leading to death. Intoxication is also linked to various short-term harms as a result of falls, accidents, or incidents of violence. An intoxicated person is also more likely to make poor choices, such as engaging in unsafe sex.

Drinking small or moderate amounts of alcohol on a daily basis may be enjoyable and help a person unwind. It may also slightly improve the cardiovascular health of men over 40 and women over 45. However, even light but frequent drinking can lead to alcohol dependence.

Years of drinking beyond the low-risk guidelines (daily consumption, with a total of more than 10 drinks per week for women, and more than 20 drinks for men) is considered chronic heavy drinking. People who drink heavily on a routine basis usually develop tolerance to alcohol, meaning they need an ever-increasing amount of the substance to achieve the desired effects. Heavy drinking is also linked to dependence and damage to almost every system in the body.

How common is alcohol use in British Columbia?

Alcohol use is very common in British Columbia:

- About 80% of residents 15 and over drink alcohol at least occasionally. (Approximately 82% of males and 76% of females drank alcohol at least once in the past year.)
- Most of the province's drinkers are between the ages of 19 and 39. (Nearly 90% of 19- to 24-year-olds and 85% of 25- to 39-year-olds drink alcohol sometimes.)
- Among young teens, alcohol is the most commonly used substance. Over 30% of 13-year-olds say they have tried alcohol.



While most alcohol consumers in the province drink responsibly most of the time, many people drink in ways that put their health and safety at risk at least occasionally:

- 40% of British Columbians (48% of males and 33% of females) admit to occasionally drinking in ways that could lead to falls, accidents, or incidents of violence.
- Almost 20% of British Columbians (26% of males and 13% of females) drink in risky ways at least once a month.
- About 5% of British Columbians (7% of males and 3% of females) drink in hazardous ways at least once a week.

When it comes to drinking patterns that could lead to both short-term and long-term harm, too many people representing both genders report regular habits of both intoxication and consumption beyond safe weekly limits (20 drinks or fewer for men, and 10 drinks or fewer for women).

Young men tend to have the riskiest habits of any group. Roughly one third of males aged 15 to 18 already drink above the low-risk guidelines. An even higher proportion of men aged 19 to 24 report drinking in ways that put their health and safety at risk, and jeopardize the lives of others.

When is drinking a problem?

Whenever a person's drinking patterns negatively affect their life, or the lives of others, they have a problem with alcohol.

Half of all alcohol-related harms and deaths are caused by social drinkers, people who normally drink wisely but just happen to have a few too many on a particular outing or occasion. Intoxication often results in vehicle accidents and incidents of violence or carelessness. In 2003, 2,197 British Columbians were injured or killed in alcohol-related car crashes. Already by 2002, the annual financial burden of alcohol-related harms for the province exceeded \$2.2 billion.

Alcohol is a problem if a person is:

- **Mixing substances.** Combining alcohol with other substances, including over-the-counter or prescription medications, can be dangerous and lead to overdose.
- **Operating a motor vehicle.** People who drive while under the influence of alcohol are risking their lives, as well as the lives of other motorists and pedestrians. In Canada, the legal limit for alcohol is .08% BAC. However, enforcement officers can take legal action against a driver with a 0.05% BAC.
- **Pregnant.** Women who drink alcohol while pregnant can harm their babies. Alcohol can be transferred from the mother into the baby's system, causing problems with growth and brain development. In short, babies can be born with Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder. Since no safe level of alcohol consumption has been determined, pregnant women should avoid drinking alcohol. Women who are trying to conceive or are breastfeeding should also avoid alcohol.

Around 35% of British Columbians say they have suffered physical, emotional, or financial harm as a result of someone else's alcohol use.



Drinking heavily over a long period of time can cause relationship problems or affect a person's work or school performance. Legal and financial difficulties are also common symptoms of chronic alcohol use. In addition, long-term drinking can lead to serious health concerns such as stomach ulcers, sexual dysfunction, liver disease, brain damage, reproductive ailments, and several kinds of cancer.

Regular use of alcohol is problematic when dependence develops. Whether a person is used to drinking one alcoholic beverage a night or three, any degree of need indicates a problem. People with alcohol dependence suffer from feelings of anxiety or panic when alcohol is

not available. If they try stopping, they may experience signs of withdrawal—headaches, nausea, and “the shakes”—within eight to 12 hours of having their last drink. In severe cases, alcohol withdrawal may include tremors, hallucinations, and convulsions. Severe alcohol withdrawal can be dangerous and may require medical assistance.

Approximately 120,000 people in BC have a high probability of alcohol dependence. Another 224,000 have some indication of alcohol dependence, with up to 89% of this group experiencing problems in their life as a result of their drinking patterns.

Wondering what constitutes “a drink”?

Check out this list of substances and sizes:

- a regular-sized bottle of beer or cider (350ml or 12oz at 5% alc.)
- a regular highball or cocktail (50ml or 1.5oz. of hard liquor at 40% alc.)
- a small glass of wine (150ml or 5oz. at 12% alc.)
- a small glass of sherry or port (85ml or 3oz. at 18% alc.)

Low-risk drinking guidelines

- Avoid intoxication (no more than 4 drinks in a single day for men, and no more than 3 for women)
- Limit your weekly intake (no more than 20 drinks for men, and no more than 10 for women)
- Take breaks during the week (at least one or two days should be reserved as “alcohol-free”)
- Avoid alcohol in situations where “no drinking” is the safest option, such as when operating a vehicle, when pregnant, and when using medications.