



alcohol and women

supporting health and wellness

Canada's Guidance on Alcohol and Health advises

- No more than two standard alcohol drinks in any week
- No more than two alcohol drinks on any day or occasion
- It is safest to not drink alcohol during pregnancy.

According to the Canadian Alcohol and Drugs Survey (2019)

- Almost 75% of Canadian women reported drinking alcohol in the past 12 months, 58% report having done so in the past 30 days.
- 20% of women reported having a problem with alcohol that negatively affected their lives.

Women may enjoy various personal, psychological, and social benefits from alcohol, like men do. However, in general, women are more vulnerable to adverse physiological effects of alcohol than men.

On average, women weigh less than men, and smaller people reach higher blood alcohol levels than larger people. Pound for pound, women have less water in their bodies than men. Even if they weigh the same and drink an equal amount of alcohol, the woman's blood alcohol concentration will be higher. Women also have less alcohol dehydrogenase (ADH), an enzyme that breaks down alcohol. Thus, women metabolize alcohol less effectively than men. Faster and longer exposure makes alcohol more harmful for women.

A low-risk benchmark (of 2 standard drinks or less per week) and a moderate risk range (of 3-6 drinks per week) apply equally to men and women. Above those amounts of consumption, health risk rises rapidly with each additional standard drink per week, and more steeply so for women than for men.

Canada's Guidance on Alcohol and Health is a starting place for women to assess their individual alcohol use practices. Exceeding minimal amounts can lead to a wide range of short- and long-term health and social problems, including alcohol dependence.

The Guidance uses research based on the average person, but the effects of alcohol vary greatly from one woman to another. Some factors that can influence the way individuals respond to alcohol include weight and size, genetics, family history, mixing alcohol with other substances or medications, and overall stress, hunger, and lack of sleep.

Women face particular health risks and realities Immoderate alcohol use in women can lead to serious and in some cases unique health problems. Osteoporosis, breast cancer, heart disease and reproductive issues (including miscarriage, premature birth, low birth weight, and Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder [FASD] difficulties for children exposed to alcohol during pregnancy) are all associated with alcohol use by women.

Women are more susceptible to alcohol-related organ disease than men. Mood altering drugs interact with alcohol to increase risks, and women are twice as likely to be prescribed these medications as men. Women also risk alcohol-related harms if they use to cope with stressors, fit with social expectations, or drink alone to avoid stigma around their use of alcohol. As well, women are at higher risk of experiencing gender-based violence such as sexual assault, fueled by others' drinking.

Everyone needs to understand the specific health risks of drinking for girls and women.

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