



Centre for
**ADDICTIONS
RESEARCH** OF BC



LOW-RISK Drinking Guidelines

Guideline 1

Avoid intoxication

Having too much to drink on a single occasion increases your likelihood of experiencing a number of immediate safety and social problems, including: injury or death due to vehicle accidents; alcohol poisoning; sexual assault; self-harm and other forms of violence; and work, relationship, and legal problems. A single session of heavy drinking also affects your health by increasing both your blood pressure and risk of stroke. (Note: The amount that a person can drink without being intoxicated varies greatly with physiology, drinking experience, and tolerance).

- Drink slowly. (Men of average weight should drink no more than two drinks in the first hour, while women should stick with one. Afterwards, both men and women should consume only one drink per hour.)
- Combine alcohol with food and non-alcoholic beverages.
- Limit your alcohol intake at any one sitting – or on any one day – to four standard drinks for men, and no more than three drinks for women. (Consume less than these amounts if you are lower than average weight, elderly, or under 19 years old.)

Guideline 2

Choose abstinence in situations where “no alcohol” is the most sensible option

Sometimes avoiding alcohol altogether is the only way to ensure you and your loved ones stay safe. Here are some examples of circumstances where “no alcohol” makes the most sense:

- When operating vehicles, such as automobiles, motorcycles, boats, snowmobiles, all-terrain vehicles, or bicycles
- When alertness is important, such as while working with machinery or dangerous equipment, participating in sports or other challenging physical activities, or when responsible for public order or the safety of others
- When using other substances, including medications such as tranquilizers, sleeping pills, pain killers, and some herbal medicines
- When pregnant, trying to conceive, or breastfeeding
- When trying to manage serious alcohol dependence
- When there’s a family history of serious drinking problems
- When suffering from mental health or other health problems, such as liver disease
- When under 16 years of age

Let’s face it

We all know it’s healthier to be a non-drinker than a chronic drinker. But what about drinking habits that lie in between the extremes of abstinence and alcohol dependence? Isn’t there any way alcohol can be part of an enjoyable and healthy life? Absolutely, say health experts, provided you follow a few low-risk drinking guidelines designed to help you avoid immediate and long-term health, safety, and social problems.

Guideline 3

Put limits on your drinking frequency and amounts

Regular heavy drinking over a long period of time increases the likelihood of long-term health problems, including: cancer of the breast, mouth, throat, and esophagus; chronic gastritis and pancreatitis; ulcers; high blood pressure and stroke; heart muscle weakness; liver damage; malnutrition; depression; nerve damage; cognitive problems; and impotency. Long-term heavy drinking also increases your potential for developing alcohol dependence syndrome (alcoholism).

To effectively manage your drinking habits:

- Limit your weekly intake to 20 drinks or fewer for men, and 10 or fewer for women.
- Build non-drinking days into your week, especially if you find yourself drinking to the maximum daily amount. (The more often you drink to the daily maximum, the more alcohol-free days are needed to avoid going over the weekly maximum.)

A standard drink is defined as one 350 ml (12 oz) bottle of beer or cooler (5% alcohol); one 150 ml (5 oz) glass of table wine (12% alcohol); one 50 ml (1 1/2 oz) standard cocktail (40% alcohol), or one 85 ml (3 oz) serving of fortified wine such as sherry or port (18% alcohol).



150ML (5oz)



350ML (12oz)



50ML (1.5oz)



50ML (1.5oz)



85ML (3oz)

Guideline 4

Know the facts about alcohol's contribution to heart health

Drinking alcohol may be good for you, but recent analysis has called this into some question. In any event, possible benefits are limited to a select number of people. What's more, there are still risks involved, as well as rules regarding drinking frequency and quantities. Know the facts before pouring your next drink.

- Only older individuals – men aged 40 and over, and women aged 45 and over – may benefit from light drinking.
- Some of alcohol's benefit, if any, could be achieved with as little as one drink every other day, while possible heart-health advantages would be maximized by two standard drinks a day for men, and one drink a day for women.
- Red wine is not the only alcoholic beverage that may provide cardiovascular benefits. All alcoholic drinks contain ethanol, the substance responsible for any improved cardiovascular health.
- Small increases in the risk of some cancers begin with just one drink a day, meaning any heart benefits of light drinking do not come without a price.
- Non-drinkers need not start drinking alcohol to improve their heart health, as there are less risky alternatives to choose from – exercise, healthy diet, stress management, and quitting smoking.

Things to keep in mind

- Alcohol use can lead to death in over 50 different ways, immediately and over the long term, and results in over 6,000 premature deaths in Canada annually.
- Most immediate deaths caused by alcohol, especially among young people, are from getting intoxicated at the wrong time and place, resulting in road, boating, ATV and snowmobile crashes, violence, self-harm, and poisoning/overdose deaths.
- Long-term deaths are caused by regularly drinking a bit too much over a number of years, resulting in heart disease, strokes, and various cancers.

How would you rate your drinking?

Is it safe?

Always safe?

Sometimes risky?

Harmful?

To rate your use of alcohol, complete the Alcohol Check Up online at checkup.silink.ca.

For this and other information on alcohol, such as answers to frequently asked questions, see www.silink.ca.

This advice provides general guidance concerning low-risk drinking, but it does not substitute for clinical advice. If you have any questions about your use of alcohol, you are encouraged to speak to your family doctor, a health professional, or a substance use counsellor.

TO GET MORE INFORMATION

About ALCOHOL

Services: 1.800.663.1441
Information: www.silink.ca
1.866.677.LINK

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HEALTH Information

Health Guide: www.bchealthguide.org
BC NurseLine: 1.866.215.4700
BC Partners: www.heretohelp.bc.ca

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