



Alcohol use

A big part of becoming an adult is experiencing and trying new things. Usually, alcohol is one of them. This Good2Talk resource highlights the consequences of alcohol use. It also provides some ways to minimize alcohol's harmful impact. Rather than promoting abstinence, we offer suggestions for how you can reduce experiencing harms if you choose to use alcohol.

How much is too much?

A standard drink is a measure of the pure alcohol you are drinking; it is not the total amount of liquid in your glass. Beer, coolers, ciders and wine contain different alcohol percentages or strength and are served in different sizes, as shown in the graphic below. The bigger the size and the higher the alcohol percentage, the bigger the increase in the total alcohol content in the container.

Binge drinking is when someone consumes at least five of any variety of these measurements in a short period of time for the purpose of getting drunk quickly.²

“Adolescents are particularly vulnerable to experiencing adverse consequences from alcohol use.”¹



The graphic below shows you how the consequences of drinking add up over the course of your life, with more drinks per week, leading to severe and irreversible diseases.³



What influences drinking?

Peers

Drinking is seen as a large part of post-secondary culture. You may choose to drink alcohol because you are finally of legal age, no longer live with parents, or to align with your peers. Feeling included and accepted by your friends is important at any developmental stage but especially during post-secondary. You may find you're comparing yourself with peers and forming identities to align with their actions.⁵ Pressures can come in two forms:

- **Direct pressures:** over-offers, teasing or coercion to drink.⁵
- **Indirect pressures:** modelling from peers or perceived social norms.⁵



On a typical drinking day, Canadian post-secondary students consumed 4.5 drinks on average.⁴



Research has shown that students who believed binge drinking to be typical or usual were approximately 7 times more likely to engage in drinking when being pressured.⁶ It's important to know your body and its limits with alcohol instead of trying to match with those whose tolerance may be higher. Your alcohol tolerance is how many drinks you can consume before experiencing intoxication.

Living situation

Different living situations have an impact on levels and likelihood of alcohol consumption. For example, living with your parents may reduce the likelihood of drinking – maybe because you want to avoid being confronted, or because alcohol is not allowed in your household. It might also be that you have curfews or want to avoid sneaking home late.

Living with roommates can increase the risk of students engaging in binge drinking. Roommates may come with the social aspect associated with drinking – the campus culture mixed with “I’ll go if you go”. One study found that if you are between 18 and 21 years old, you are 142% more likely to drink when living with roommates than when living with your parents.⁷





Coping with stress

The change of environment when moving into post secondary life can come with a variety of stressors like:

- Academics.
- Relationships.
- Work.
- Homesickness.

Using alcohol to cope is a form of maladaptive coping, which means adopting negative or avoidance-based behaviours to manage an issue or stressor. You can have a look at our resource on [coping with change](#) for more information about this.

Effects on education

Binge drinking and alcohol misuse (using alcohol as a coping mechanism or exceeding the limit of 5 drinks in a relatively short period of time) is linked to educational achievement and academic performance. It is associated with lower grades, skipping class and school failure or non-completion. Drinking has shown to escalate health-risk behaviours – like substance use – to criminality, violence, and unemployment.¹ Binge drinking may also impair memory and decision-making, and could create underlying risk for mental health problems, social economic status, and instability.



It is important to keep in mind your future goals and values when thinking about engaging in drinking. The consequences of drinking may affect your post-secondary studies and may even lead to dropping out. Try not to think just about the present but also your future, asking yourself, “How will this affect me in the long run?”

Health consequences of binge drinking

Binge drinking is associated with a variety of consequences, ranging from immediate, to 24 hours, and to long-term. Some of the most prominent and frequent are listed here:

Physical health

Hangover – symptoms that occur 6 to 24 hours after a heavy or prolonged drinking episode. Hangover symptoms can include headaches, drowsiness, dizziness, and gastrointestinal problems. Thought process and learning are also impaired from hangovers, creating an inability to concentrate.⁸

Alcohol poisoning – occurs when your blood alcohol concentration, or BAC, reaches 450 mg/dL. You may notice a loss of muscle co-ordination, severely slurred speech, drifting in and out of consciousness and increased vomiting. Alcohol poisoning is a serious and life-threatening issue, and can result in coma, death by respiratory acidosis and hypotension.⁸ In cases of alcohol poisoning (or suspected), call 911 immediately.

Blackout – can occur if you lose memory following an episode of binge drinking. Blackouts are caused by acute dysfunction of the hippocampus, which is the part of your brain that creates and solidifies memories. It interferes with your brain's ability to make long-term memories from short-term memories and experiences.⁸

Behaviours and actions

Impulsive behaviours can arise when engaging in episodes of binge drinking. Impulsive behaviours negatively impact your ability to regulate your actions and plan proactively. They can also result in spontaneous behaviour.⁶ While this may seem harmless, it can lead to trying new things you otherwise wouldn't, such as substances, or saying things to people you wouldn't usually say. You may engage in behaviours that "sober-you" would think twice about doing. These might include engaging in unplanned or unprotected sexual behaviours, engaging in behaviour that causes injuries, or driving after using alcohol or riding as a passenger with a driver who has used alcohol.



Nearly 1/3 of all fatal automobile crashes involve alcohol in ages 15-20.⁸

Long-term health effects

Long-term use of alcohol results in more serious health effects. Under 25 years old, specifically, is a critical period for brain development. At a time when a young person is sensitive to alcohol, using it can lead to long-term changes in brain functioning.⁹



Liver cirrhosis.



Stroke.



Cancer.



Cardiovascular disorders.



Neuropsychological impairments, such as memory and brain development.



Fetal alcohol syndrome in babies of persons who drink while pregnant.

Planning ahead

The list below can help you prepare before a night out, so that if you choose to drink, you can drink in a low risk manner and minimize the negative effects of alcohol.

- Eat a full meal to ease the effects of alcohol on your stomach.
- Set your own limits and stick to them.
- Have a non-alcoholic beverage in between each alcoholic beverage.
- Have your phone fully charged so that you can call for a safe ride home.
- Share your location with friends and have a buddy system in place.
- Never hesitate to call 911 in the event of an emergency.
- Have an electrolyte beverage available for the next morning.

Interventions

If you, or someone you love, is using alcohol and it is negatively affecting them and they want help, here are some ways you can approach the situation.

Private support

Acknowledging that your use of alcohol may be resulting in harms, and realizing you want to stop, is the first major step. Understandably, you may want to be private in seeking help. Reaching out to counsellors can help you figure out a plan



privately, with personalized steps, to restrict unhealthy habits and replace them with alternatives. Confiding in your trusted friends and family may be helpful so they can also support you through this process.

Group support

You may prefer group sessions, as they provide a form of social support from a relatable level and offer reassurance that you are not the only one in this situation. These programs are designed to be completed as a collective and can provide comfort through difficult times. Various group programs can be found below in the resources section.

For a loved one

If you feel a loved one's alcohol use is negatively impacting them, it is important to acknowledge that you are not responsible for their actions. You can consider offering help if you are able to without hurting yourself in the process.

Do you think a friend may be experiencing harms from their alcohol use? If you feel comfortable doing so, it may be helpful to inform trusted caregivers or support people if you believe your friend's use of alcohol is extreme, consistent, and harming their health and well-being. You can help by personal acts, such as avoiding buying them any further alcohol or substances of any kind. If you feel confident and comfortable, try suggesting support programs and offer to attend with them.

Make sure you speak to a counsellor yourself during this process if you feel your own mental health and well-being is affected.





Other Resources

Looking for other resources for yourself or a loved one? Have a look at the list below for some more information.

- **Saying When App:** [Introducing the Saying When app | CAMH](#)
- **Alcoholics Anonymous:** [Have a problem with alcohol? There is a solution. | Alcoholics Anonymous \(aa.org\)](#)
- **SMART Recovery:** [SMART Recovery](#)

References

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The content for this resource was written by a post-secondary student for post-secondary students with the guidance of the staff from the Knowledge Institute on Child and Youth Mental Health and Addictions, Kids Help Phone, Ontario 211 and Connex Ontario. No content should be taken as medical advice or replaced by information or guidance from a qualified healthcare professional.

If you or someone you know is struggling with alcohol use as a post-secondary student, you or they can reach out to one of our professional counsellors or volunteer crisis responders 24/7. We're Good2Talk whenever you need us!