



# FACTS ABOUT ALCOHOL

Addiction Prevention & Treatment Services



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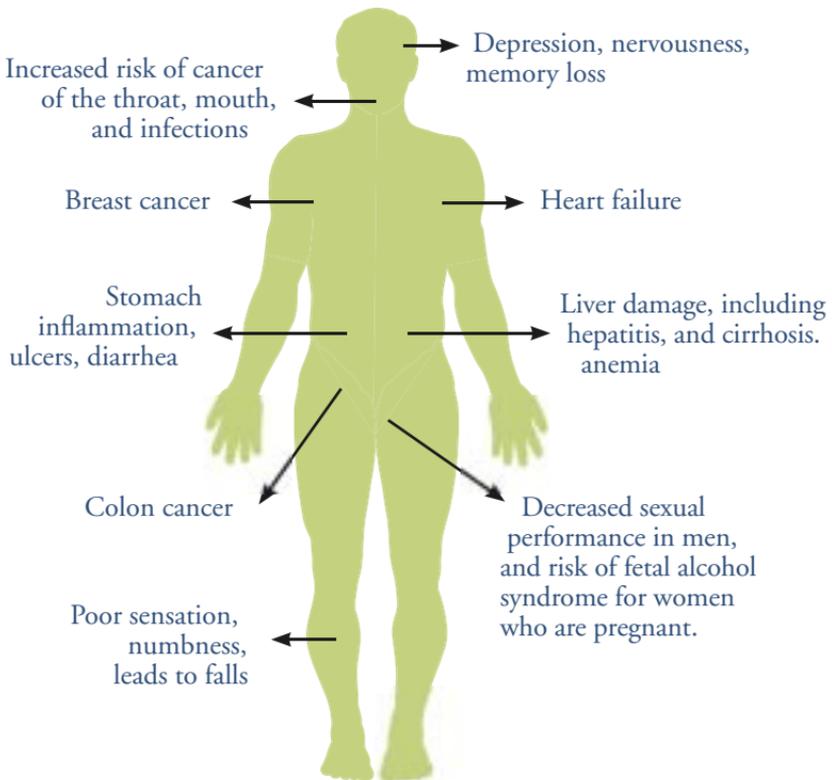
(diagram opposite)

Adapted from Babor, T.F., Higgins-Biddle, J.C., Saunders, J.B.,  
Monteiro, M.G. *AUDIT: The Alcohol Use Disorders Identification Test:  
Guidelines for Use in Primary Care.* 2nd edition. (2001). Pg 7.

It is helpful to know a few facts about alcohol so you can make a fully informed choice about what changes you want, or need, to make in your life.

Alcohol is a central nervous system depressant. It slows down basic body functions such as breathing, heart rate and motor co-ordination. Some other effects of drinking include relaxation, sociability, lowered inhibition, intoxication, impaired judgment and impaired motor skills. This means that you may make poor decisions, or do things you wouldn't normally do (such as unsafe sex, arguments, etc.) while intoxicated.

This picture shows some of the health problems (mental and physical) that can be caused or made worse by excessive drinking.



## WHAT IS HARMFUL INVOLVEMENT WITH ALCOHOL?

“Harmful involvement” describes a pattern of drinking behaviour that result in problems with a persons’ health (physical, mental or emotional) and their relationships.

Notice that the amount you drink is not mentioned here, rather the results and behaviours around the drinking. While the amount you drink is one consideration, it is not the only one. For example one person may consume less alcohol than another, but experience much more harms in their life. You need to consider not only how much you drink, but the context in which you drink: the who, what, when, where and why of your drinking behaviour, and its consequences.

The consequences of high-risk drinking can be short or long term, and involve physical or social aspects. Some consequences that are related to harmful involvement are:

- injuries and deaths from operating a motor vehicle while intoxicated
- increased risk of cancers (e.g. breast, colon, mouth, liver etc.)
- increased risk of other diseases, such as heart disease, pancreatitis and hepatitis.
- increased risk of violence (sexual assaults)
- injury to yourself and others, such as falls, drowning, fights, property damage and injuries on the job.
- complications from combining alcohol with other medications.
- increase incidence of poor judgement.
- If you drink while pregnant it can harm the baby.
- conflict with family, friends, and legal issues.

If you are experiencing any of these harms or behaviors, it is important to think about how these behaviors are affecting yourself and those around you.

## WHAT IS ALCOHOL DEPENDENCE?

“There are two main types of dependence: physical and psychological. The two often develop simultaneously, depending on the intensity of alcohol use.

- Physical dependence is generally characterized by continued, compulsive use in spite of negative consequences; the onset of withdrawal symptoms when use is discontinued; and increased tolerance. When someone has become physically dependent on a substance, his or her body no longer functions normally without it.
- Physical dependence develops in stages: experimentation becomes occasional, is followed by regular use, which leads to tolerance (the body adapts to the substance and needs higher and more frequent doses to obtain the same effect), which leads to even greater use and addiction.
- Psychological dependence is more difficult to define, but is usually described as a mental and emotional pre-occupation with a drug or activity, so that it becomes the central focus for one’s life. The person develops a psychological need, or compulsion, for the effect of a drug or the stimulation from an activity.
- Psychological dependence usually begins when a substance or activity is used to solve or avoid problems, or when a person becomes obsessed with the pleasurable or mood-altering effects of using the drug or engaging in the activity. Dependence develops as a person becomes focused, or fixated, on a substance or activity.
- Any immediate source of gratification, pleasure, thrill, or relief from pain, boredom, and the “hard edge” of reality can lead to psychological fixation or dependence.”

*Addiction Fact Sheet. Nova Scotia Health Promotion, Addiction Services. 2003.*

## WHAT IS BLOOD ALCOHOL CONCENTRATION (BAC)?

Blood Alcohol Concentration (BAC) is the amount of alcohol in your bloodstream. Your BAC is what is used to determine if you are legally impaired. Your BAC depends on four things:

- How much you drink
- How fast you drank it
- Your body weight
- Your gender

The liver processes alcohol at a set rate. So no matter how fast you drink, your body will not eliminate the alcohol any faster.

Remember: you can still be legally impaired if you have a BAC equal to or lower than the legal limit of 0.08. e.g. you are on medication and only had one drink, but it causes you to be sleepy etc.

**There are other factors that influence how you react to alcohol:**

- **Tolerance** – someone who drinks regularly needs more to get the same experience of intoxication.
- **Mood** – whether you are in a positive or negative state of mind can have an effect on your behaviour when drinking.
- **Environment** – you may act differently in different situations, for example; if you are drinking at a very loud, crowded party compared to with a few friends at home.
- **Your health** – if you have other medical conditions or have poor health, poor diet etc, you may have complications or have a stronger reaction to the alcohol.

- **The presence of other drugs in the body** – the combination of alcohol and other drugs may cause a very strong reaction that can lead to some very dangerous complications.
- **Whether there is food in the stomach** – a full stomach slows the rate of absorption into the bloodstream.
- **Age** – young people are more sensitive to the effects of alcohol because their bodies have not finished growing. Older people are more sensitive as well, because their metabolism may be slower and they tend to use more medications than younger people.

## WHAT IS TOLERANCE?

Tolerance is when a person needs to consume greater amounts of alcohol to experience the same effect. This happens after a person has been drinking regularly for a period of time. Even though a person may have to drink more to feel the effects, their blood alcohol levels continue to rise at the same rate. For example, if you used to feel tipsy after two or three drinks but now it takes four, your body has NOT learned to process alcohol faster – your BAC will continue to rise according to how much you drank, how fast you drank it, your body weight and your gender. While you might not feel like you have had too much to drink before driving, you may still be legally intoxicated.

## WHAT IS WITHDRAWAL?

Withdrawal happens when you stop or significantly reduce your level of drinking. The level of consumption, or the amount and length of time you have been drinking before experiencing withdrawal will be different for everyone. Some of the symptoms of withdrawal are anxiety, shakiness, sweatiness, upset stomach or vomiting, not being able to sleep, and in extreme cases, seizures. These symptoms can be dangerous, especially if you have medical conditions that may complicate them, are on medications, are taking street drugs, etc. To be safe, you will need to be monitored by a nurse or doctor when you start to make significant change to your alcohol intake levels or have any of these symptoms.

## WHY SHOULD I BE THINKING ABOUT MY ALCOHOL USE?

You don't have to always be intoxicated or meet the criteria for alcohol dependence to experience harm from your drinking. You may only be intoxicated once in a while, but perhaps had a serious fall when you were drinking, or had a hangover the next day or got into a fight. These would be cases of problems you might encounter even if you are not a regular heavy drinker. Or maybe you have developed a stomach problem, even though you are hardly ever intoxicated, but have been drinking steadily for years.

# WHAT ARE LOW RISK DRINKING GUIDELINES?

You may still have questions and concerns around the amount of alcohol you use. Broad guidelines around moderate alcohol consumption are outlined below to give you an idea of what is considered to be “low risk drinking.” This is only one example of guidelines. Feel free to look up other guidelines, and make your own decision.

**0** : Zero drinks = lowest risk of an alcohol-related problem

**1** : Have one or two non-drinking days a week

**2** : No more than two drinks on any one day

**9** : Women: up to nine drinks a week

**14** : Men: up to 14 drinks a week

**Note:** These are “low-risk” guidelines. They are not “no-risk” guidelines. You may still be at risk of experiencing harms in certain situations, and the low risk drinking guidelines **DO NOT** apply. It is recommended that you stop drinking if you:

- have health problems such as liver disease or mental illness
- are taking medications such as sedatives, painkillers or sleeping pills
- have a personal or family history of drinking problems
- have a family history of cancer or other risk factors for cancer
- are pregnant, trying to get pregnant or breastfeeding (there is **NO** safe level of drinking in this situation)

*...continued on next page*

- will be operating vehicles such as cars, trucks, motorcycles, boats, snowmobiles, all-terrain vehicles or bicycles
- need to be alert; for example, if you will be operating machinery or working with farm implements or dangerous equipment
- will be doing sports or other physical activities where you need to be in control
- are responsible for the safety of others at work or at home
- are told not to drink for legal, medical or other reasons

*Adapted from Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (2006)*

## WHAT IS A STANDARD DRINK?

To understand the low risk drinking guidelines it is important to know what a standard drink is, as this is a term used in calculating the quantity of alcohol in a drink. Different drinks (beer, wine, hard liquor) have different amounts of alcohol in them. It is important to remember that alcohol is alcohol, no matter what its form. It is the same substance and affects the body in the same way. However, different drinks have different alcohol content and it's important to know how much alcohol is in each to figure out exactly how much you are drinking. You will need to know this information if you want to track your drinking, such as using the drinking log that comes with the "My Choice Workbook".

In Canada a “standard drink” is considered to be 13.6 g of pure alcohol, or the amount of alcohol in one 12 oz. can or bottle of regular beer, one 5 oz. glass of wine or one 1.5 oz. “shot” of distilled spirits like rum and vodka.

This picture may help you to get an idea of the size of a standard drink.



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