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Centre for Addiction and Mental Health
Centre de toxicomanie et de santé mentale

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Alcohol and Chronic Health Problems

There is a link between alcohol and chronic health problems.

Know the facts.

Reduce your risks.

Understand the link

Many of us read or hear reports in the media about problems related to alcohol. They might be about crashes related to drinking and driving or fights outside bars.

Chronic health problems also get a lot of media coverage. These are health problems that generally develop over a long period of time and stay with us for the rest of our lives.

There is a growing body of research that shows that drinking even small amounts of alcohol may increase your chances of developing various chronic health problems.

Know the facts

We're in a better position to take steps to stay healthy when we understand how things affect our health. We can start or continue doing things that are good for our health and change some things that pose risks to our health.

Here are some facts to consider about the link between alcohol and chronic health problems.

Drinking alcohol increases your risk of developing a number of chronic health problems, including:

- cancers of the breast, colon, rectum, liver, esophagus, head and neck (for example, mouth, larynx and pharynx)

- cardiovascular diseases such as heart disease and strokes
- liver disease
- inflammation of the pancreas
- alcohol dependence
- mental health problems.

For those people who drink and smoke cigarettes, the risk of developing certain head and neck cancers is even greater.

The way in which you drink can increase your risk of developing chronic health problems:

- The more you drink on average per week, the more likely you are to develop chronic health problems.
- The more you drink on one drinking occasion, the greater your risk for developing chronic health problems.
- Drinking without eating increases your risk of developing cardiovascular problems such as high blood pressure and blood clotting.

Women develop problems related to alcohol use within a shorter period of time than men do. Women's bodies are generally smaller than men's, contain less water and metabolize alcohol at a slower rate than men's bodies. Because of this, it takes women's bodies longer to get rid of alcohol, and it takes less alcohol to affect women compared to men. For example, women who drink alcohol are at greater risk than men for developing certain cancers, such as oral, rectal and breast cancer.

Reduce your risks

Most Canadian adults who drink alcohol do so without causing harm to themselves or others.

If you drink alcohol, here are some ways you can reduce your risk of developing chronic health problems.

1

Follow Ontario's low-risk drinking guidelines:

- Drink no more than 2 standard drinks on any one day.
- If you are a woman, have no more than 9 standard drinks a week.
- If you are a man, have no more than 14 standard drinks a week.

These guidelines apply for most chronic health problems—but in some instances they are too high. For example, having just one to two drinks per day can increase your risk of developing certain cancers. The best way to reduce your risk is to reduce the amount you drink.

2

Know what a standard drink is (see diagram). This way you will know how much you are drinking.

3

Keep track of how much you drink—per day and per week.

4

Wait at least one hour between drinks.

5

Alcohol may provide health benefits to the heart. These health benefits apply mainly to people over 45. In most cases, one drink of alcohol every other day is enough to obtain these benefits. However, if your goal is to improve your health, you're better off following a healthier diet, getting more exercise and giving up smoking—rather than starting to drink or drinking more than you do now.

6

If you are hosting a party where you serve alcohol, offer your guests food and non-alcoholic drinks as well.

7

Work with your family to develop rules around alcohol use at home, when you're out and when driving or operating other machinery.

8

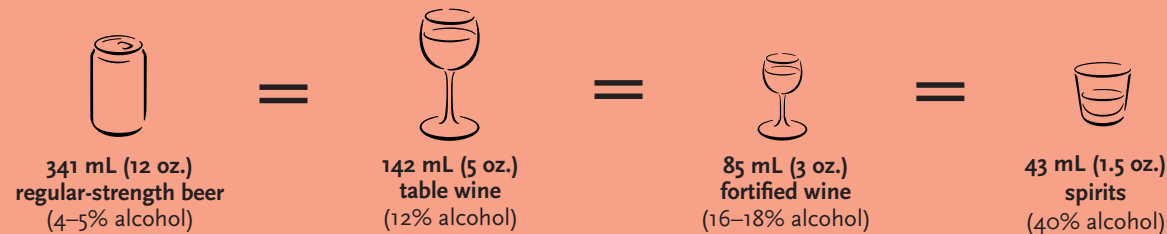
Consider talking to other important people in your life about the links between alcohol and chronic health problems. People can improve their health if they know the facts and reduce their risks.

9

If you are concerned that your drinking may be affecting your health, please check with your doctor.

A STANDARD DRINK

One standard drink equals 13.6 grams of alcohol. A standard drink looks like the images below:



Higher alcohol beers and coolers have more alcohol than one standard drink.