Girls, Women and Alcohol: Making Informed Choices
This resource was written by women for women to give you useful information about alcohol and help you make healthy and well-informed choices about your alcohol use. It is not designed to make women stop drinking alcohol.
Introduction

Drinking alcohol is a common social activity for many women. In fact, a 2010 Health Canada survey shows 74 per cent of women reported drinking alcohol in the past year. However, sometimes women don't think about the possible risks associated with alcohol. Many women don't know that alcohol affects women differently than men.

This guide looks at how alcohol affects women and the risks associated with drinking. All information is based on research to help women make informed choices about alcohol use. Research sources are listed under References at the back of this guide.

Women react differently to alcohol based on several factors:
- body size and composition
- age
- genetics (biology)
- previous and current life circumstances
- stress

All of these factors can influence the way women respond to alcohol and can act in combination to increase risk. There are also some very specific health risks associated with heavy drinking.

This guide:
- presents low risk drinking guidelines for women
- describes factors that affect drinking in girls and women
- highlights the specific health risks for women who drink
- provides information on other resources about women and drinking

Key Points

- Alcohol is commonly used by women.
- Alcohol affects women differently than men.
- Women can lower their risk while drinking alcohol by following the low risk guidelines.
- Heavy drinking can lead to serious health problems.
- Several factors can increase the risk to women who drink.
- Support is available to help women make changes in their drinking choices.
Contents

1. Low Risk Drinking
2. Risks of Heavy Drinking
3. Individual Responses to Alcohol
4. Other Factors
5. Support for People Close to You
6. Resources
Drinking guidelines have been developed in Canada to help women and men set safe drinking levels and to monitor their drinking. These guidelines can help reduce the health risks of drinking alcohol, by increasing awareness of:

- the amount of alcohol we consume
- how often we drink
- situations when drinking increases the risk of harm

These guidelines are adapted from Canada’s Low-Risk Alcohol Drinking Guidelines, published by the Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse.

**Low Risk Drinking Guidelines for Women**

**How much do you drink?**

Avoid intoxication.

- Women should not drink more than two standard drinks per day, five times a week (three drinks per day for men).

- Women should not drink more than three standard drinks on any single occasion to reduce the risk of injury or harm [four for men].

**How often do you drink?**

Avoid exceeding the weekly limit, to reduce the risk of long-term health problems.

- Keep at least one or two days of the week alcohol-free.
- Women should have no more than 10 standard drinks per week [15 for men].

**When not to drink!**

Be aware of situations where drinking has increased risks for women. Don’t drink when you are:

- pregnant or when planning a pregnancy
- using other drugs, including medications
- driving or operating machinery
- responsible for the safety of others

The amount of alcohol found in a standard drink is the same regardless of the type of alcoholic beverage. Each drink in the diagram below is one standard drink.
Self Assessment

Many of us tend to overestimate the size of a standard drink. We also underestimate how much we drink when we get our drinks topped up, rather than finishing one completely before having another.

To avoid getting drunk, you must know your own limits. You may become drunk after two, rather than the three drinks noted in the guidelines. So two drinks might be your personal limit.

Along with monitoring the number of drinks you have on one occasion, you should monitor the number of days you drink in a week. It is easy to fall into a pattern of drinking every day, with no alcohol-free days.

If you feel you are drinking more than the recommended amount, it’s a good idea to talk to people who can give you advice and support. Talking to a family physician, healthcare provider or counsellor can help you assess and reduce your alcohol use. [See the Resources section at the back of this guide.]
What is heavy drinking?

It is difficult to define heavy drinking. The low risk drinking guidelines offer a starting point by clarifying what is not low risk. Going over the amounts outlined in the guidelines can lead to alcohol dependence and a wide-range of long term health problems. Women tend to be more susceptible than men to health problems caused by heavy drinking.

What kinds of problems are caused by heavy drinking?

Heavy drinking among women can cause numerous long term health problems:

- For women, heavy alcohol use can significantly increase the chances of osteoporosis, breast cancer, heart disease and stroke and alcohol-induced brain damage. These problems are further complicated if you smoke or use other substances and if you are exposed to environmental toxins. (e.g. moulds, pesticides).
- Women become addicted or dependent on alcohol faster than men.
- Women develop cirrhosis of the liver sooner than men and with less alcohol. This means they are also more likely to die from cirrhosis.
- Women are at a greater risk of experiencing violence, such as sexual assault, when drinking heavily.
- Heavy drinking has particular risks for women who are pregnant or are planning to become pregnant. These risks are described in Section 4.
- Research in the past decade shows long term drinking, even at low levels, is linked to many serious illnesses and chronic health conditions in both women and men. Long term alcohol use can increase the risk of at least eight types of cancer (mouth, pharynx, larynx, esophagus, liver, breast, colon, rectum) and numerous other serious conditions (e.g. epilepsy, pancreatitis, dysrhythmias, hypertension).

Research indicates that prolonged heavy drinking can result in the development of serious health problems for women such as:

- osteoporosis
- breast and other forms of cancer
- heart disease and stroke
- brain damage
- liver disease
- addiction or alcohol dependence
3 Individual Responses to Alcohol

The effects of alcohol vary greatly from one person to the next. There are several factors that affect your response to alcohol.

**Being a Woman**

Women are more vulnerable than men to alcohol’s effects. This means that even after drinking smaller amounts, women generally feel greater effects for a longer period of time. Three key factors help explain the reasons women’s and men’s bodies break down alcohol differently.

- Women have less water in their bodies to help dilute the alcohol in their blood streams.
- Women’s bodies absorb alcohol at a slower rate.
- Women have lower levels of a particular enzyme that breaks down alcohol in their bodies.

**Physical responses to alcohol**

The effects of alcohol vary according to physical size. Women who are smaller and/or weigh less will often have a more intense reaction to alcohol. Some women quickly feel the effects of alcohol with only a couple of drinks. These women should drink less than the recommended low risk drinking guidelines.

All women should listen to their bodies when they drink and adjust their drinking levels accordingly.

**Life circumstances and stressors**

Heavy drinking can be a reaction to stressful events in women’s lives. Women often report using substances to deal with negative feelings or problems and to raise their confidence. Women’s use of alcohol and other substances is commonly linked to:

- Domestic violence
- Violence and abuse experienced as a child
- Sexual assault

Women’s drinking levels are often influenced by their partner’s drinking patterns as well as stress in the relationship. Social expectations and judgements about parenting can add shame and fear for women with alcohol problems. As a result, women may:

- Not get help as soon as they need to
- Get help for problems other than alcohol use
- Not get referred to alcohol treatment

As women try to balance several different roles and responsibilities, they can experience a great deal of stress. While a small amount of alcohol may relieve stress in the short term, drinking to reduce stress may increase your anxiety levels and lead to alcohol dependence.
**Age**

Research suggests that the brains and bodies of young women who drink may be particularly vulnerable to the effects of alcohol. Drinking can affect critical physical development during adolescence and young adulthood. Younger women who drink increase their risk of unwanted pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections. For example, up to 10 per cent of Canadian teens say that using drugs or alcohol was the reason they had intercourse for the first time. A US study showed one in three young pregnant women (aged 14 to 21 years) had been drinking when she conceived. Young women need to recognize the short and long term health and social effects of drinking when they are deciding how much and when to drink.

As we age, the kidneys, liver, cardiovascular system and brain all change. These changes make the elimination of alcohol less efficient and can make us more sensitive to the effects of alcohol. It takes less alcohol for older women to feel the effects of alcohol, so it’s important for them to remember this when deciding how much to drink.

**Genetics**

Research shows that some people are biologically at risk of developing a drinking problem. It is important to consider what role alcohol has had in your own family. There are no hard and fast rules however. Even if you have a family history of alcohol addiction, it doesn’t mean you will necessarily have the same problems. In the same way, people without a family history of alcohol addiction can develop alcohol problems.
Several other important factors can also influence the effects of alcohol and the circumstances where women should avoid drinking alcohol.

**Medication use**

Women who are taking medication should ask a doctor or pharmacist if they should avoid alcohol when they’re taking it. Mixing medications and alcohol can change the way the alcohol or the medication reacts in the body and can create health risks or injuries. Women should be aware of the risks of using tranquillizers with alcohol. Tranquillizers are prescribed more often for women than men and can increase the depressant effects of alcohol.

**Hunger and fatigue**

Both hunger and feeling tired will increase the effects of alcohol. Hunger increases the rate at which alcohol is absorbed into the bloodstream. Fatigue, or having low energy, means your liver won’t be able to get rid of alcohol as efficiently. The depressant nature of alcohol will make feelings of tiredness or stress more intense.

**Pregnancy**

Drinking is a critical issue for women who are pregnant. Important research shows that drinking alcohol during pregnancy may lead to having:

- a baby with Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD)
- a miscarriage or stillbirth
- a baby with low birth weight
- a baby born prematurely

FASD describes a range of harm caused when pregnant women use alcohol. The harm can include brain damage, vision and hearing problems, slow growth and birth defects (ex: heart problems). The brain damage may cause the child to have lifelong learning disabilities and problems with memory, reasoning and judgment.
There is no known safe amount of alcohol, at any stage of pregnancy, that will completely prevent the risk of having a child with FASD.

Choosing not to drink any alcohol while pregnant or planning to become pregnant is your safest option. Many women may drink before they know they’re pregnant — but it is never too late to stop drinking alcohol during pregnancy. Quitting alcohol as soon as possible and looking after your health are the best ways to lower the risk of harm to you and your fetus.

**Breastfeeding**

When you drink, alcohol gets into your breast milk. The amount of alcohol in breast milk is directly affected by the amount the mother consumes. In large amounts, it may affect your baby’s sleep or reduce the amount of milk your baby takes at feeding time.

Breastfeeding mothers should limit their alcohol intake to one drink or less per day. If you are going to drink alcohol, it’s best to feed your baby first, have a drink and then wait two to three hours before you breastfeed again. This allows time for the alcohol to be eliminated from your body. Mothers who only drink once in a while should continue to breastfeed, because the benefits outweigh the risks. Breastfeeding is not recommended if you drink large amounts of alcohol.
5 Support for People Close to You

If you think a woman close to you may have a problem with alcohol, there are ways you can offer support.

- Start by asking if she wants to talk about it and find out what she feels would be most helpful.
- Stay non-judgmental and don’t move too quickly to solutions.
- Offer support in practical ways such as doing things together that don’t include alcohol; caring for her children so she gets some time off; going to an appointment with her.

- Remember that ultimately, it’s her choice to make changes and you must respect her right to choose.

All change takes time. It’s common to stop and start several times before making a lasting change. You should recognize small successes and offer reassurance that your support will be ongoing. By highlighting her strengths and successes, family and friends can help raise her self-confidence and the knowledge that change is possible.
For more about alcohol use, for you or someone close to you, many sources of information and support are available.

**Phone Support and Referral**

**Health Links**  
Health Links is a 24-hour, seven days a week phone information service. It is staffed by registered nurses who can answer questions on health care and suggest other resources.  
Phone 24/7: **204-788-8200** in Winnipeg;  
toll-free **1-888-315-9257**.

**Motherisk**  
This is a helpline for women who have questions about using alcohol, drugs and medications during pregnancy and breastfeeding.  
Phone: **1-877-327-4636**  
Website: [www.motherisk.org](http://www.motherisk.org)

**Klinic Crisis Line**  
This is a 24-hour, seven days a week crisis phone line. It offers confidential counselling, support and referral.  
Phone: **204-786-8686** in Winnipeg;  
toll free **1-888-332-3019**

**Osborne House Crisis Line**  
This is a 24-hour, seven days a week phone line for women experiencing violence or abuse.  
Phone: **204-942-3052** in Winnipeg;  
toll-free **1-877-977-0007**

**Manitoba Addictions Information Line**  
This is a toll-free phone line that answers questions about alcohol and drugs and provides support options for those struggling with substance use. This service is available Monday to Friday 8:30am to 4:30pm.  
Toll-free phone: **1-855-662-6605**

**Community Supports**

**Project CHOICES**  
This is a Winnipeg program for women who use alcohol and are sexually active. It offers up to four brief counselling sessions and one session with a nurse to talk about birth control options. The program gives you the information you need to make the best choices for your health. Visit [www.projectchoices.ca](http://www.projectchoices.ca) or phone:  
Klinic at **204-784-4072** or  
ACCESS NorWest at **204-938-5900**

**Addictions Foundation of Manitoba**  
AFM offers a number of choices depending on your interest or need. If you want help with alcohol or other drugs, for you or your family, you can meet with a counsellor who will help you decide on the service that best suits your needs. Phone toll free:  
Northern Region **1-866-291-7774**  
Western Region **1-866-767-3838**  
Winnipeg Region **1-866-638-2561**
References


Credits

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Copies of this document can be downloaded from Healthy Child Manitoba’s website at: www.healthychild.mb.ca.

Free print copies are available by calling 204-945-2266 in Winnipeg; toll free 1-888-848-0140.

Available in alternate formats upon request.