

Fact Sheet

ALCOHOL

What is Alcohol?

Alcohol is the most commonly used drug in Canada. It is found in beer, wine, and liquor (like whiskey, rum, or vodka). The chemical name for the alcohol in these beverages is ethyl alcohol or ethanol.

Alcohol is a “downer” or a depressant drug which means it slows down the functions of the central nervous system including the brain. It may seem like alcohol makes people more outgoing and active, but this is because alcohol reduces the activity of the brain which lowers inhibitions and the user feels more relaxed.

What Does Alcohol Do To The Body?

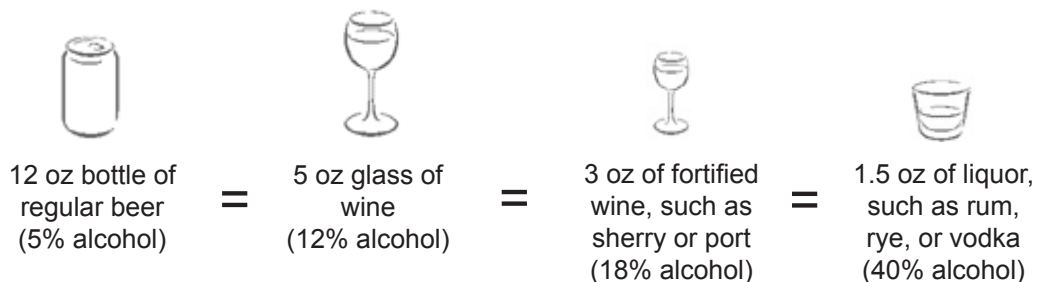
Alcohol enters the bloodstream through the stomach and intestine. Once in the bloodstream, it is carried to other parts of the body quite quickly. In fact, it reaches the brain almost immediately. Alcohol stays in the body until it is broken down by the liver and eventually leaves the body through breath, sweat and urine.

The brain is the body’s control centre, so alcohol has a big impact on the way we behave. The more alcohol in the blood, the greater the impact. Judgment, inhibitions, reaction time, co-ordination, vision, speech, balance, walking and standing are all affected by alcohol.

It can take up to two hours for the body to get rid of the effects of one drink (one beer, one glass of wine or a single shot of whisky). So even if you have one drink an hour, alcohol builds up in your blood because you’re drinking faster than your body is breaking down that alcohol.

What is a standard drink?

- 1 standard drink contains 13.6 grams of alcohol
- 1 standard drink is equal to:



Note: Some beers and coolers have more alcohol than one standard drink.

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Short-Term Effects

- Alcohol may give you a pleasantly relaxed feeling, often making you giddy and dizzy. Or, you may feel depressed, wild or aggressive.
- Your coordination and balance become impaired.
- Your hearing and sight become less reliable, as does your reaction time.
- Your judgment, or ability to make thoughtful decisions, is impaired.
- Your inhibitions are lowered, meaning you may do or say things you normally wouldn't.
- Alcohol poisoning, or overdose is possible. Binge drinking or drinking a lot of alcohol in a short period of time can lead to alcohol poisoning. If a person drinks rapidly, a fatal dose of alcohol can be ingested. After a person passes out, the alcohol that is still in their stomach continues to be absorbed into the blood stream. If too much alcohol enters your bloodstream, it may cause your breathing and heart rate to slow down and eventually stop. In other cases, a person who's been drinking may vomit in their sleep and then choke to death. Binge drinking is considered five or more drinks in one sitting for males and four or more drinks in one sitting for females.

Long-Term Effects

- Damage to the liver, heart and brain
- Diseases of the stomach and pancreas, cancer of the mouth, throat and esophagus, high blood pressure, anemia, weakened immune system, and muscle weakness.
- Risk of addiction

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What Are the Risks?

- Alcohol can kill you. Drinking large amounts of alcohol can lead to coma or even death. Death could also occur as a result of drinking and driving or engaging in other risk-taking behaviour while under the influence of alcohol.
- Mixing alcohol with medications or illicit drugs is extremely dangerous and can lead to accidental death.
- Drinking affects your ability to make good decisions.
- You increase your chance of having a major injury.
- You may develop a dependence on alcohol.
- You may engage in risky behaviours you would not normally engage in if you weren't drinking. – Drinking and driving, unprotected or unwanted sex.
- You may commit a violent act or be the victim of violence.
- It can affect your schoolwork, since you may find yourself drinking instead of studying, or trying to write a test with a hangover.
- You may say or do something you will regret later, which could put your friendships on the line.
- Alcohol also increases the risk of suicide in young people.
- Alcohol can hurt you--even if you're not the one drinking. If you're around people who are drinking, you have an increased risk of being seriously injured, involved in car crashes, or affected by violence. At the very least, you may have to deal with people who are sick, out of control, or unable to take care of themselves.
- Drinking during pregnancy puts the baby at risk of birth defects, and the risk increases the more you drink. These birth defects can include small size, problems with hearing, mental retardation, learning disabilities, and unusual facial appearance. Fetal Alcohol Syndrome Disorder (FASD) is used to describe children with all or some of these effects. There is no known "safe" amount you can drink while pregnant, so most doctors recommend avoiding alcohol altogether during pregnancy.

Addiction

Experienced drinkers are those who tend to drink more often and they generally develop a tolerance for alcohol. This means that the effects they once felt after a drink or two, are not felt until they drink a larger amount of alcohol. Far from being a good thing, tolerance is a warning sign for addiction.

You may be addicted to alcohol if: you're not in control of how much, and when, you drink; or you need to drink just to be able to function in life; or if you continue to drink despite seeing that your drinking causes problems.

Also, there is a genetic predisposition to alcohol addiction, which means that you're at greater risk for addiction if someone in your family is addicted.

Who Shouldn't Use Alcohol?

People who should not use alcohol:

- People under the legal age limit of 19 years old. Drinking is harmful for teens because their brains are still developing throughout adolescence and well into young adulthood. Drinking during this critical developmental period can lead to lifelong impairments in brain function, particularly as it relates to memory, motor skills, and coordination.
- People with certain health problems, such as liver disease or certain psychiatric illnesses.
- Women who are pregnant.
- People who are operating vehicles such as automobiles, motorcycles, boats, snowmobiles, all terrain vehicles or bicycles.
- People who need to be alert, for example, while working with machinery or dangerous equipment, while engaging in challenging physical activities or when responsible for the safety of others or public order.
- People who are under any legal or other restriction on drinking personally or because of the environment they're in.