

WHAT IT IS

Alcohol is the most commonly used drug in Canada. The alcohol found in beer, wine, and spirits (like whiskey, gin, or vodka) is ethyl, or grain alcohol. It is made by fermenting fruit or vegetable matter with yeast bacteria. In the case of beer or wine, the entire product is then bottled and sold. With spirits, the fermented alcohol is distilled—meaning it's separated from the rest of the liquid, leaving a purer, more concentrated form of alcohol.

WHAT IT DOES

Alcohol is a depressant drug. It slows the normal working of the nervous system, including your brain. This 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. Plus, when you drink alcohol, your judgment, or ability to make thoughtful decisions, is impaired, and your inhibitions are lowered, meaning you may do or say things you normally wouldn't.

The more alcohol you have in your body at a given time, the stronger all of these effects will be. And you can't "sober up" quickly, either. Alcohol is metabolised (broken down) by the liver at a fixed rate—how quickly you'll break down alcohol depends on your age, gender, weight, and metabolism, but the average is about one drink per hour. Drinking coffee or water, or taking a shower won't speed up the process.

Alcohol affects young people differently than adults. Your brain and other organs are still developing, and alcohol consumption can prevent your body from maturing properly. Also, the younger you are the less body mass you have so the affects of alcohol will be stronger.

A hangover is your body going through withdrawal from alcohol. The day after drinking heavily, you may feel nauseous, dizzy, shaky, and exhausted, and have an intense headache.

In some adults with specific types of heart disease, alcohol can reduce the risks of heart attack. But consuming alcohol increases the risks of other health problems. So it's still better to use tried and true methods to control heart disease: eating well, exercising, and quitting smoking.

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.

SHORT-TERM EFFECTS

Drinking and then driving is risky in a number of ways. Any alcohol in your system impairs your ability to drive, increasing the chances you'll have an accident that hurts or kills yourself or others. People driving under the influence are eight times as likely as a sober person to be in an accident. About 38% of traffic fatalities (3,000 deaths) in Canada each year are alcohol-related. A high proportion of these deaths are people in their teens and 20s.

But you're also at risk legally. Driving with a blood alcohol concentration (BAC) of .08% or higher is considered Driving Under the Influence (DUI) and is an offence under the Criminal Code of Canada. However, police may still charge you with lower levels of BAC if they feel you're impaired.

Because drinking lowers inhibitions and impairs judgment, many young adults engage in risky behaviours other than drinking and driving. If you drink, you may find yourself taking risks with your health and safety—like having unprotected or unwanted sex. Alcohol is often a factor in fighting, so you might wind up committing, or being a victim of, violence. It also affects your school-work, since you may find yourself drinking instead of studying, or trying to write a test with a hangover. Plus, when impaired by alcohol, 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.

SHORT-TERM EFFECTS (CONTINUED)

Every year, many Canadians die from alcohol poisoning, or overdose. Drinking too much alcohol in a short period of time can lead to unconsciousness, the slowing or stopping of breathing, and death. Unfortunately, it's not uncommon for someone to drink heavily and fall asleep, without anyone realizing they're dying. In other cases, a person who's been drinking may vomit in their sleep and then choke to death.

LONG-TERM EFFECTS

Drinking alcohol heavily over a long period of time can cause serious health problems. The brain, liver, and heart are the most damaged by alcohol. In addition, alcohol use can cause diseases of the stomach and pancreas, cancer of the mouth, throat and esophagus, high blood pressure, anemia, weakened immune system, and muscle weakness.

ADDICTION

Drinking heavily or often can lead to tolerance. Tolerance happens when your body adapts to alcohol, so you need to drink even more to get the same effect. 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, which means that you're at greater risk for addiction if someone in your family is addicted.

If you're addicted to alcohol and stop drinking, your body goes through withdrawal. This is called the "detoxification" stage. You may have trouble sleeping, feel jumpy and sweaty, and may even experience hallucinations, as your body slowly rids the alcohol from your system and returns to normal.

Physical side effects aren't the only thing you need to deal with as you recover—there are emotional and social factors as well. You will need to develop the mental strength to be able to avoid alcohol in the future. This means you need long-term support from family and friends. The important thing to remember is the addicted person isn't to blame. Like any addiction, alcoholism is a health issue, not a crime. Support is available for alcoholics, as well as for their families.

REDUCING THE RISKS

- Don't drive, or allow anyone else to drive, after drinking.
- Don't drink heavily and/or regularly—you're putting yourself at risk for alcohol poisoning, addiction, and other serious health problems.
- If you drink, cutting down the amount you drink can reduce the risks to your health.
- Don't mix alcohol with any other drugs (over-the-counter, prescription, or illegal).

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