

Alcohol and Health

Alcohol and the Workplace



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Content

- 2** Introduction
- 3** Industry Trends
- 4** Workplace Culture
- 8** Neighbourhoods
- 9** Social Support
- 9** Prevention and Intervention:
A Comprehensive Approach
- 15** Alcohol and Tobacco Use
- 16** Conclusion



Introduction

In Alberta, alcohol is part of our culture. According to the 2013 Canadian Alcohol Tobacco and Drug Use Survey, 76% of Albertans aged 15 and older used alcohol within the previous 12 months. While the majority of Albertans use alcohol responsibly, there are some who don't. When people misuse¹ alcohol, they can put important parts of their lives at risk, including their employment.

More than 67% of Canadians over the age of 15 are in the workforce, and they spend an average of 60% of their waking hours in the workplace. The workplace has a strong influence on employee health and wellness and, in turn, has a positive correlation with family and community benefits. A healthy workplace is one where employees enjoy a safe and healthy work environment, where they have strong and supportive working relationships that give them a sense of control and influence over what happens to them, and where they are encouraged and supported to look after their own health, both at work and at home.

Research has shown that multiple factors can influence an employee's risk of alcohol misuse. In this resource, we will explore key risk factors and explain how employers and employees can address them.

¹ In the studies reviewed while developing this resource, "alcohol misuse" was not defined consistently. However, in all cases, the level of misuse discussed exceeded Canada's Low Risk Alcohol Drinking Guidelines (LRDG) at some level. As such, in this resource "alcohol misuse" means "exceeding the weekly and/or daily limits set in the LRDG."

Industry Trends

Numerous studies from 2003–2009 indicate that people working in certain industries are more likely to misuse alcohol. For example, the construction, extraction (e.g., mining, oil, gas) and food and beverage industries have the highest level of alcohol misuse. Other groups that report high levels of employee alcohol misuse include labourers, as well as the transportation and material-moving, farming and sales industries. In general, people employed in physically demanding occupations were more likely to misuse alcohol than those with less physically demanding occupations (e.g., clerical, office, professional). Studies have also found that those working in blue-collar² occupations were more likely to misuse alcohol than their white-collar counterparts. A similar trend has also been documented when comparing unskilled blue-collar workers to skilled blue-collar workers, as skilled workers were less likely to misuse alcohol. According to a 2009 study, those employed in Alberta’s construction industry were found to have the highest rates of both alcohol and tobacco use than any other industry in the province. One possible explanation for these findings is that, with the exception of the food and beverage industry, the majority of these industries predominately employ males, and being male is a risk factor for alcohol misuse in and of itself.

² The terms “white collar” and “blue collar” are used in this resource as they are commonly used in workplace health promotion and sociology literature. By no means are these terms intended to discriminate against employees.

Blue-collar and White-collar Workers

The term “blue-collar” is often used to describe a worker who performs manual labour, wears a uniform or works in a trade, construction or service-related field. These workers may be skilled or unskilled, and examples of this type of occupation include cleaners, maintenance workers, painters, drivers, machine operators or tradespeople such as welders or electricians.

The term “white-collar” is often used to describe a worker who performs less manual labour, generally has more than one year of post-secondary education, works in an office environment and performs clerical, professional or managerial work. Examples of this type of occupation include physicians, teachers, lawyers, nurses, managers, engineers, accountants and salespeople.



Workplace Culture

Culture in the workplace significantly affects an employee's alcohol use. Workplace culture can encourage or discourage alcohol use and has been found to be the most consistent and strongest predictor of employee alcohol use and misuse. One 2009 Alberta study found that workplace culture was influenced by

- employee demographics
- alcohol availability (in or around the workplace)
- job responsibility, job demand and job insecurity

Employee Demographics

The demographics of a workforce affect the level of alcohol use, and a number of individual demographics can be both risk and protective factors for alcohol misuse. For example, being female, being married, having children under the age of 17, and having a post-secondary degree all act as protective factors and reduce the odds of alcohol misuse. A 2009 Alberta study found that

- workplace norms were significantly affected by the age and marital status of employees, such that, not surprisingly, younger single workers were most likely to drink together after work
- sex, age and marital status have a significant impact on alcohol problems, such that younger single men were more likely to report alcohol-related problems
- younger workers were more likely to be employed in workplaces with greater alcohol availability (either on or near the worksite) than other groups of workers

In addition, a 2004 study on alcohol consumption and gender ratios in the workplace found that women working in gender-balanced jobs (i.e., those that have an equal mix of males and females) versus gender-typed jobs were more likely to drink alcohol, perhaps suggesting that the number of men in the workplace affects social norms around alcohol.

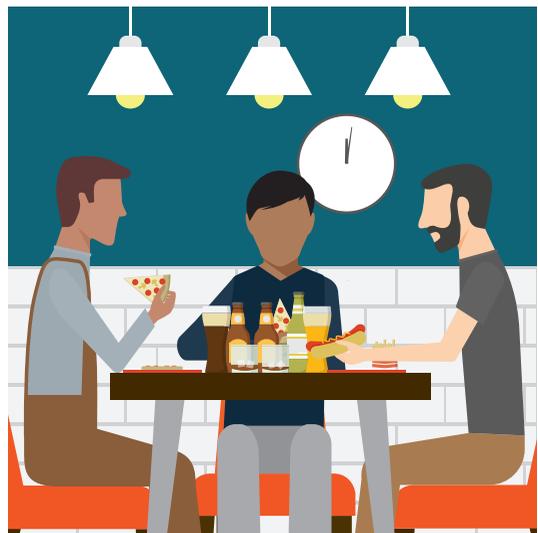
Gender Matters

Gender appears to be an important variable in many of the factors examined in this resource. In some situations, being male appears to be a risk factor in and of itself. For example, certain male-dominated industries, like construction, may have higher rates of alcohol misuse; however, it is difficult to know if this trend is occurring because of the industry itself, or the fact that there are more men working in this area.



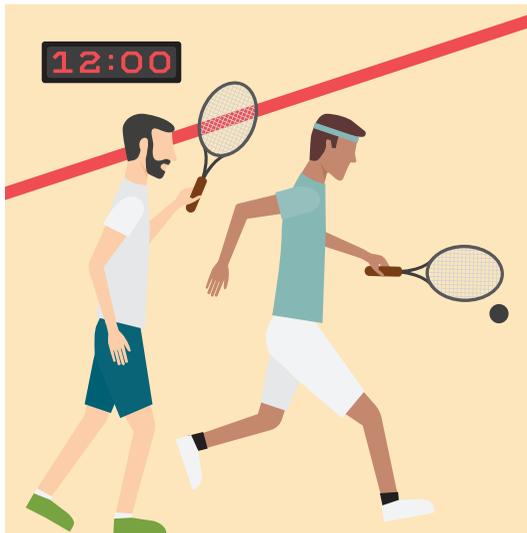
Alcohol Availability

Workplace cultures that support drinking are associated with alcohol misuse. In three separate studies, the main workplace norm that was supportive of drinking was going for drinks after work, which was influenced by the availability of alcohol at or near the workplace. Other types of workplace norms that support alcohol misuse include managers turning a blind eye to hangovers at work, sharing drinking stories and hosting clients with alcoholic beverages, either as part of a work-related role or as an unwritten expectation. One 2006 study found that the majority of workday drinking occurs during lunch breaks, which is important to consider whether workplace culture and/or job duties encourage or require staff to entertain clients or reward staff members this way.



Research indicates that in most work settings, management is responsible for the development, implementation and enforcement of alcohol and other drug policies. Research also indicates, however, that managers are more likely than other employees to self-report increased rates of alcohol consumption during the day, working under the influence of alcohol or working with a hangover. These disparities underscore how critical it is to lead by example, and why workplace culture is important. These findings on prevention and intervention strategies suggest the following:

- Efforts need to focus on changing workplace norms around alcohol
- Depending on the gender ratios in the workplace, efforts should be made to target messaging at men



Healthy role modeling is important for a healthy workplace culture.

The terms “workplace” and “worksite” are often used interchangeably. However, they can have different meanings. In general, the term “worksite” refers to a location, whereas “workplace” is a more general term that includes all of the locations of employment under one employer.



Job Responsibility, Job Demand and Job Insecurity

In a study of Albertans, increased job responsibility, including risk of harm on the job, travel requirements and long hours, was linked to greater alcohol consumption in men, but not for women. Interestingly, self-reported work stress was not found to be related to alcohol misuse problems.

High job demand was found to have a protective effect on employee alcohol misuse. A 2011 study found that for every 1% increase in psychological (i.e., cerebrally challenging or stimulating) job demand, the risk of alcohol misuse decreased by 9%. Evidence from a 2012 study supports this finding and also found that having a job with higher demands reduced the odds of binge drinking. This suggests that reduced stimulation and motivation at work, due to boredom, may lead to alcohol misuse. A 2008 study found that as employee skill discretion (e.g., job variety, creativity, high skill level, use of special skills) increased, there was an associated corresponding decrease in alcohol misuse. However, some of these findings may be related to differences between genders. A 2005 study found that low variety in applied skill at work was linked to heavy alcohol use in men, but not in women.

Job insecurity³ is, remarkably, a protective factor and reduces risk for alcohol misuse. A Canadian study found that for each 1% increase in job insecurity, the risk of alcohol misuse was reduced by 12%, suggesting that people who feel their jobs are at risk will eliminate behaviours that may increase their risk of losing their jobs, such as alcohol misuse.

³ Job insecurity is largely subjective, and something that an employee feels given their overall job situation. This may be influenced by the person's perceived risk of losing their job and/or having their hours or pay reduced. Job insecurity often results from precarious employment and is the opposite of job security.

Shift work

Shift workers have been found to report more alcohol use as a sleep aid than daytime workers do. They have also been found to binge drink more often than daytime workers. Shift workers were found to be twice as likely to engage in risky short-term drinking compared to daytime workers. Interestingly, the odds of a shift worker drinking daily or near daily were 80% less than those of a daytime worker. Those working non-standard work shifts (non-day shifts) were more likely to drink alcohol before coming to work, as well as during the workday. As such, providing support to employees to help them adapt to shift-work is an important variable for employers to consider.



The Centre for Addiction and Mental Health defines binge drinking as, for males, consuming five or more standard alcoholic drinks on one occasion and, for females, four or more drinks.

Neighbourhoods

A 2011 Canadian study found that a person's neighbourhood had a substantial effect on their alcohol misuse. The study found that neighbourhoods accounted for 12% of the onset of misuse and 4% of recurrent misuse. The authors of the 2011 study went on to argue that based on their research, in combination with the findings from a 2007 study on neighbourhood socioeconomic status, health and working conditions of schoolteachers, that "neighbourhoods with low-socioeconomic status [are] associated with higher individual alcohol consumption and heavy drinking."



Social Support

Social support in the workplace, as well as from friends and family, can have a protective effect on an employee's risk of alcohol misuse. A 2011 Canadian study found that for each 1% increase in social support, the risk for alcohol misuse decreased by 4%.

Prevention and Intervention: A Comprehensive Approach

In 2002 (the most recent data available), the cost of alcohol misuse in Alberta was estimated at \$1.6 billion, or \$527 for every Albertan. This is important information for employers, as productivity losses accounted for the bulk of these costs, at \$855 million. Other significant costs were related to health care (\$407 million) and law enforcement (\$275 million). A strong business case has been made to explain why addressing risks such as alcohol misuse in the workplace, with a comprehensive prevention and intervention approach, can have a positive effect on an organization's bottom line.

A comprehensive approach can help

- reduce health-care costs (e.g., Workers' Compensation Board costs, recruitment and retention costs)
- reduce absenteeism and presenteeism
- increase productivity
- increase employees' health knowledge and job satisfaction
- reduce employees' risk of depression and stress

The following sections give an overview of the implications and opportunities for prevention and intervention.

Absenteeism and Presenteeism

Absenteeism is a pattern of being absent from work. Presenteeism refers to the problems faced when employees come to work in spite of illness, which can have harmful repercussions on the business's performance. It can also refer to the expectation of employers for their employees to be present at work, regardless of whether any work is available or accomplished.

Implications for Prevention and Intervention

Workplace culture affects alcohol use. In some cases, alcohol use in the workplace is a learned behaviour. One study found that employees of a brewery (an employee group at risk of problem drinking) did not have statistically different pre-employment drinking rates compared to other occupations. Instead, drinking behaviours were learned on the job. A similar trend might be found in the food and beverage industry, sales industry, or other industries where pre-shift, on-shift or post-shift alcohol consumption is more prevalent. In this case, the workplace affects its employees' drinking behaviours, even if it does not officially endorse them. As such, it is important to determine what the organizational culture is around alcohol and consider different strategies that could influence these norms. Consider whether

- alcohol is served or available to staff onsite
- staff are required to entertain clients as part of their job
- staff celebrate and/or unwind together on- or off-site with alcohol
- leadership, including front-line managers, has a positive, negative or neutral attitude toward alcohol use

In addition, although clear policies about alcohol use and alcohol impairment at work are an important step to address issues of alcohol in the workplace, these efforts can be compromised if management doesn't value or enforce these policies. For example, if a manager doesn't take responsibility for these policies or have the necessary training to enforce them, then the policies will not be effective. These policies can also sometimes be difficult to effectively implement, especially when managers don't value them. Some studies have found that managers' report higher rates of alcohol consumption during the workday than other front-line employees do. It has also been reported that managers face a number of issues when it comes to policy enforcement in the workplace, including

- the organization is tough on employee use of other drugs, but does not address employee alcohol use
- company leadership doesn't support or advocate a tough stand on the effects that alcohol has on the workplace
- alcohol use is embedded in workplace practices (e.g., celebrations and client hosting), suggesting it is acceptable in the workplace

Opportunities for Prevention and Intervention

Workplace programs to address alcohol misuse (as well as other drug problems) are more effective when a comprehensive approach is taken. In *“Preventing Alcohol and Other Drug Problems in the Workplace”*, Midford, Welander and Allsop outline how interventions to reduce the risk posed by substance use in the workplace fall into five broad categories: policy development, information and education programs, health promotion programs, regulation of alcohol use, and assistance and treatment.



Policy development

A written company policy signals a corporate commitment to substance abuse prevention, mental health promotion and employee health. Corporate policies provide the basis for further interventions. When developing a policy, it is important to make sure it

- is developed in consultation with the workforce
- is universally applicable
- is relevant to the specific organization
- includes comprehensive coverage and specific procedures for responding to different issues (e.g., alcohol or other drug use in the workplace)
- educates employees, and raises awareness of company policies
- educates and trains employees on how the policy will be implemented
- is implemented in stages
- has a clear evaluation of the policy's objectives

Information and education programs

A key aspect of a comprehensive approach to any intervention or program within the workplace is providing health information to all employees (e.g., information on why alcohol and other drug use can be a problem in the workplace setting). Education programs can focus on the company's policies, health risks and other problems associated with not addressing health issues. These programs can provide employees with tools they can use to assess their own or others' health behaviour. Education programs can also provide information on where to go for help. Health information should include the guidelines on the following page.

Canada's Low-Risk Alcohol Drinking Guidelines



Women who want to drink moderately and avoid associated long-term health risks should have no more than 10 drinks a week, with no more than two drinks a day most days.



Men who want to drink moderately and avoid associated long-term health risks should have no more than 15 drinks a week, with no more than three drinks a day most days.



To avoid intoxication and reduce the risk of short-term injury or acute illness, women should have no more than three drinks on a single occasion.



To avoid intoxication and reduce the risk of short-term injury or acute illness, men should have no more than four drinks on a single occasion.



To avoid any kind of habituation or dependency, it is recommended that everyone—men and women—choose not to drink at all at least one or two days a week.



If pregnant, planning to become pregnant, or about to breastfeed, the safest choice is to drink no alcohol at all.



It is inappropriate to drink alcohol under certain circumstances such as when one

- has important decisions to make
- is engaged in dangerous physical activity
- is operating a motor vehicle, machinery, or mechanical or electrical equipment
- is responsible for the safety of others
- is taking medication that is affected by alcohol
- has mental or physical health problems
- has a problem with alcohol dependence
- is pregnant or planning to become pregnant

Health promotion programs

Health promotion programs have the ability to change health environments and teach participants how to improve or maintain their health, including making healthier choices related to substance misuse, stress management and exercise.

Regulation of alcohol use

Regulating alcohol use has a number of functions, and may include measures such as banning alcohol and other drug use, and compliance drug testing.



Assistance and treatment

Assistance and treatment commonly involves referring employees with alcohol and other drug use problems, or mental health issues, to an assistance program. Alberta Health Services also has a number of free and confidential services. In Alberta, call 1-866-332-2322 for more details.

Workplace interventions related to alcohol use should aim to attract employees with any type of alcohol-related problem, rather than just those employees who have experienced work-related problems as a result of alcohol misuse. This is important because research indicates that fewer than 1% of Albertans link problems at work to their alcohol use.

It's Our Business: Addressing Addiction and Mental Health in the Workplace

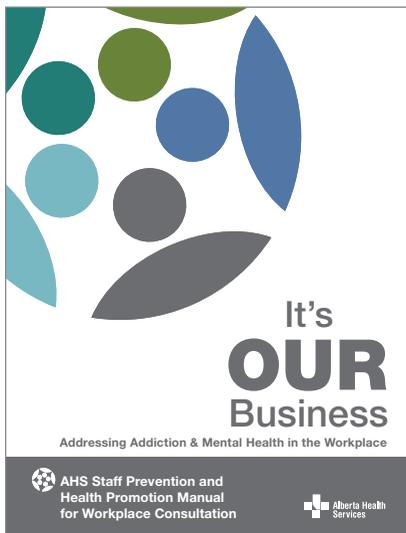
The *It's Our Business (IOB)* manual is a resource for Alberta's employers. It outlines health promotion strategies and activities, including work-place policy development. This evidence-based resource will help to support businesses in reducing the harm associated with addiction and mental health concerns and foster and maintain healthy, safe workplaces and employees.

IOB will help Alberta Health Services staff, allied health professionals, and employers to:

- understand the business case for investing in employee health and workplace programs
- understand addiction and mental health issues
- learn about alcohol and other drugs, tobacco, gambling and mental health in the workplace

IOB will help employers to:

- learn to talk openly about addiction and mental health with their staff
- help their employees find addiction and mental health services they need, confidentially and appropriately
- learn how to foster and maintain a healthy, safe workplace where people feel valued and motivated



The full IOB manual provides in-depth information on the following topic areas

- Workplace health and the business case
- Promoting workplace health
- Understanding addiction and mental health in the workplace
- Alcohol, other drugs, problem gambling and tobacco
- Mental health
- Family and social support
- Policy development
- Assessing fitness for work
- Effective performance management
- Getting help: treatment, return to work and accommodation

To access a digital copy of the full IOB manual, visit <https://www.albertahealthservices.ca/assets/info/amh/if-amh-iob-manual.pdf>

The IOB hand-outs provide practical tips, ideas and steps for each of the topic areas listed on the previous page. The handouts can be found in the full manual; they can also be accessed separately at <https://www.albertahealthservices.ca/assets/info/amh/if-amh-iob-handouts.pdf>

Alcohol and Tobacco Use

Due to the strong association between alcohol use and tobacco use, it may be most effective to address both substances concurrently, thereby increasing the audience the message reaches. Studies show that people who drink also tend to smoke, and vice versa. Furthermore, alcohol dependence and nicotine dependence often co-occur, suggesting that the two disorders are not independent. People who are dependent on alcohol are more than three times more likely than the general population (45.4% to 12.8%) to be dependent on nicotine, the active and addictive ingredient in tobacco. Among people with a nicotine dependence, the rate of alcohol dependence is four times greater than it is in the general population (13.5% to 3.8%). A 2011 study also found that for each cigarette smoked, the risk for alcohol misuse onset and recurrent alcohol misuse increased by 4%. In an Alberta study, smoking was significantly related to hazardous⁴ alcohol use, with 20% of smokers reporting hazardous drinking, compared to only 6% of non-smokers. The prevention and intervention strategies mentioned in this resource can be adapted to fit interventions for both substances.



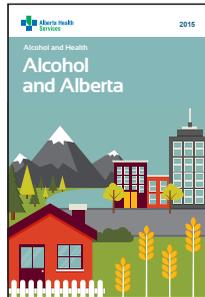
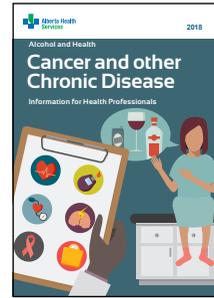
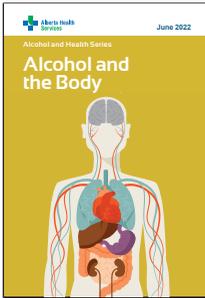
⁴ In this resource, hazardous alcohol use is determined when someone scores 8 or higher on the Alcohol Use Disorders Identification Test (AUDIT). The AUDIT is a 10-item screening tool developed by the World Health Organization to assess alcohol consumption, drinking behaviours and alcohol-related problems.

Conclusion

The intention of this resource is to provide a broad overview of what factors can influence employee alcohol misuse and highlight trends to be aware of. It is also intended to share practical suggestions about how to create positive and healthy workplace cultures, steps to take to implement preventative measures and intervention types that might be useful. For more information about alcohol use in Alberta, please refer to the resource in this series entitled *Alcohol and Alberta*.

Alberta Health Services offers a range of prevention and treatment services to assist businesses in managing workplace addiction and mental health concerns. For more information, and to find an addiction and mental health services office near you, please call the 24-hour Addiction Helpline at 1-866-332-2322 or the 24-hour Mental Health Helpline at 1-877-303-2642. For more workplace-specific resources, please visit: <https://www.albertahealthservices.ca/amh/Page2673.aspx>

Explore the AHS Alcohol and Health Series



More information means informed decisions

Well informed health professionals and communities will be more aware of the impacts of alcohol on their health and the health of those around them. This awareness provides the opportunity for upstream conversations on how to prevent or reduce alcohol-related harms.

The Alcohol and Health Series is available digitally and in print.

[Alcohol & Health Series | Alberta Health Services](#) (digital download)

Allied health professionals should contact their local AHS Addiction and Mental Health office to access print copies.

Alberta Health Services offers a wide range of
addiction and mental health services.

For individuals looking for information for someone they care
about, or for themselves the Addiction Helpline and the
Mental Health Helpline are available.

Addiction Helpline
1-866-332-2322

Mental Health Helpline
1-877-303-2642

Both helplines are free, confidential and
available 24 hours a day.

