Content

2 Introduction
3 Alcohol is a Drug
3 Canada’s Low-Risk Alcohol Drinking Guidelines
5 Alcohol Use in Alberta
7 Alcohol and Health
8 Drinking and Driving
9 Alcohol Availability
10 Addressing Alcohol-Related Harm in Alberta
12 Conclusion
Introduction

In Alberta, alcohol is so much a part of social events that it is not usually thought of as a drug. However, alcohol is a drug, albeit a legal one, and it is also the drug that Albertans use the most. For example, in the 12 months preceding the 2012 Canadian Alcohol and Drug Use Monitoring Survey (CADUMS), 1 76.2% of Albertans aged 15 and over used alcohol. Most Albertans who drink do so responsibly. The proportion that drinks harmfully varies by age group. This resource will discuss the use of alcohol in Alberta, the factors that affect the use of alcohol, and the consequences of use.

1 While newer data on alcohol use is available, CADUMS provides more comprehensive information on alcohol use in Alberta. CADUMS was conducted annually from 2008 to 2012 to assess use of alcohol and other drugs by Canadians aged 15 years and older. Respondents answered several questions related to alcohol use and drinking behaviour.
Alcohol is a Drug

Alcohol is a depressant drug and is included, along with sleeping pills, in the sedative-hypnotic class of drugs. All depressant drugs slow down the nervous system and can cause drowsiness, induce sleep, or relieve pain.

In beverages, pure ethyl alcohol is diluted with various ingredients that affect the colour, consistency and taste. Spirits such as whisky and gin usually contain 40% pure alcohol, table wine 12%, regular beer 5%, and spirit and wine-based coolers 5%. The usual serving (standard drink) contains 0.6 oz. (17 ml, 13.5 g) of pure alcohol in the form of 1.5 oz. (45 ml) of spirits, 5 oz. (150 ml) of table wine, or 12 oz. (355 ml) of regular Canadian beer. The effect of alcohol does not depend on the alcoholic beverage, but rather on the amount of pure ethyl alcohol consumed.

Canada’s Low-Risk Alcohol Drinking Guidelines

Canada’s Low-Risk Alcohol Drinking Guidelines were informed by the most current scientific evidence and provide a standardized set of guidelines that promote consistent, current information across Canada to help people make informed choices and moderate their drinking. These guidelines are for adults between the ages of 25 and 65 who choose to drink and are of average weight and height. Those that fall outside these parameters should exercise extra caution if they choose to drink alcohol.

It is also important to recognize that these are low-risk, not no-risk, guidelines and the guidelines set limits, not targets, for alcohol consumption.
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

For more information on Canada’s Low-Risk Alcohol Drinking Guidelines, refer to the resource in this series titled *Low-Risk Drinking* or visit the Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse website at www.ccsa.ca.
Alcohol Use in Alberta

• **Current alcohol use:** consumption of alcohol in the year before the survey.

• **Harmful or hazardous use:** measured by the Alcohol Use Disorders Identification Test (AUDIT). Scores of eight or higher are indicative of harmful or hazardous levels of alcohol use in the 12 months prior to the survey.

• **Use exceeding low-risk drinking guidelines:** for women, alcohol use exceeds low-risk guidelines if they consume more than 10 drinks a week, with more than two drinks a day most days or more than three drinks on any single occasion. For men, alcohol use exceeds low-risk guidelines if they consume more than 15 drinks a week, with more than three drinks a day most days or more than four drinks on any single occasion.

• **Heavy monthly use (binge drinking):** four or more drinks for women and five or more drinks for men in a single sitting once a month or more often in the 12 months prior to the survey.
Student Alcohol Use

The Canadian Student Tobacco, Alcohol, and Drugs Survey (CSTADS) collects data on youth substance use, including alcohol use, and other areas identified by schools as priorities, such as bullying, mental health and how connected students feel to their school. When asked about their alcohol use in the 12 months prior to the 2012/2013 CSTADS, Alberta youth in grades 7 through 12 indicated the following:

- 39% (versus 41% nationally) reported having a drink of alcohol that was more than just a sip.
- 76% of that group (versus 72% nationally) had five drinks or more of alcohol on one occasion.

Binge Drinking

Alberta’s Office of the Chief Medical Officer of Health accepts the definition of binge drinking offered by The Centre for Addiction and Mental Health: for males, binge drinking is five or more standard alcoholic drinks consumed on one occasion; for females, the number is four drinks.

Binge drinking also refers to a pattern of drinking that is heavy (exceeding the four- or five-drink limit) and occasional (e.g., monthly or weekly rather than daily), and frequently serves the sole purpose of getting drunk.

Binge drinking cancels any health benefits from moderate drinking and can cause social problems, injury and chronic health problems. When youth binge drink, they are much more likely to develop dependence on alcohol and to be injured or to injure others.

For more information about alcohol and youth, please refer to the resource in this series titled Alcohol and Adolescents.
Alcohol and Health

Health Risks

In its publication *Canada’s Low-Risk Alcohol Drinking Guidelines: Frequently Asked Questions*, the Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse (CCSA) reports that even average alcohol use presents significant health risks. When use is long-term, even as little as one or two drinks daily, the risk of cancer of the mouth, pharynx, larynx, esophagus, breast, liver, colon and rectum increases. Long-term average alcohol use also increases risk of seizures, pancreatitis, liver cirrhosis, irregular heartbeat, and high blood pressure and stroke.

These facts underline the caution that following the guidelines does not eliminate risk. In the short term, every drink increases a person’s chances of being injured, of being involved in motor vehicle collisions, of being involved in violence (as victim or perpetrator), and of harm from risky sexual behaviour. For those who are depressed, drinking increases the chances of impulsive suicide attempts.

Once drinking exceeds the guidelines, all possible benefits of light drinking vanish. Heavier drinking, even if occasional, poses the possibility of alcohol poisoning, and increases the chances of the cancers and other chronic diseases described above.

Health Benefits

The benefits of moderate drinking apply to men and women over the age of 45. The greatest benefits accrue with drinking up to one standard drink per day. This offers some protection against diabetes and some forms of heart disease for this age group only. Drinking more than one standard drink a day reduces benefits while increasing the risk of other diseases (see “Health Risks,” above). Drinking more than the guidelines recommend, as mentioned above, negates all health benefits.
Drinking and Driving

Across Canada, driving with a blood alcohol concentration (BAC) of 0.08 or higher is illegal and offenders can face criminal charges. In Alberta, there are additional sanctions for drivers with a BAC equal to or greater than 0.05. For example, first offenders may face an immediate three-day licence suspension and three-day vehicle seizure. New drivers (graduated licensed drivers) found with any blood alcohol are faced with an immediate 30-day licence suspension and seven-day vehicle seizure.

Impaired driving continues to require enforcement efforts in Alberta. Transportation Alberta indicates that the chance of a driver that has been drinking alcohol, being involved in a fatal collision is one in five; further, the more serious the collision the greater the chance that a driver has been drinking. The five-year period ending March 31, 2014 saw 42,913 criminal convictions for impaired driving in Alberta. Alcohol-related collisions caused 444 deaths and 6,649 injuries between 2009 and 2013. The costs to families and to society as a whole are significant and include the devastating loss to families and friends of those injured or killed because of the dangerous mix of alcohol and motor vehicles.
Alcohol and Alberta

Alcohol Availability

Privatization

Alberta was the first province in Canada to privatize liquor sales in 1993. It remains the only province in Canada with a solely privatized system. This means that private businesses own and operate liquor outlets. The government’s role is to carry out regulatory responsibilities and collect revenue from liquor sales. Since privatization, the number of retail liquor stores in Alberta has been growing.

Outlet Density and Opening Hours

Permitted outlet density is set by each municipality, resulting in the variation of density across the province. For example, municipal regulations for Calgary stipulate that liquor stores must be at least 300 metres apart. In Edmonton, they must be 500 metres apart. A retail liquor store may set its own hours of operation between the maximum allowable hours of 10:00 a.m. and 2:00 a.m., Monday through Sunday. In 1993, there were 208 liquor outlets in Alberta and as of June 2015 the number of outlets increased to 1,376.

Availability and Harm

Research demonstrates a direct association between availability of alcohol and resulting harm: the greater the ease of access to alcohol, the more alcohol people consume and the greater the increase in associated problems. Reductions in availability have the opposite effect. In the book *Alcohol: No Ordinary Commodity* (2010), Dr. Thomas Babor and colleagues report the following:

- When the minimum legal drinking age is raised, alcohol-related problems are reduced among young people, along with a reduction in alcohol sales.
- When the opening hours of liquor sales venues are restricted (shorter hours or more closed days), less alcohol is consumed and alcohol-related problems are reduced.
- The cost of making alcohol less physically available is low in relation to the savings that can be realized in terms of social and health costs.
Addressing Alcohol-Related Harm in Alberta

Alberta Health Services (AHS) is committed to reducing harm associated with alcohol, other drugs and gambling by strengthening the availability of addiction information, prevention and treatment services.

Information: Laying the Foundation

AHS provides Albertans with current, accurate and relevant information about alcohol, tobacco, other drugs and gambling.

Research and education are important to everything we do to help people with substance use problems, from promoting awareness of addiction issues and services to supporting prevention and treatment programs.

Along with the information AHS provides online, hard copy materials and consultations are available in communities across the province through addiction programs and services.

Prevention: Building Strengths, Reducing Risks

AHS provides programs aimed at preventing problems and reducing harm related to alcohol, tobacco other drug use and gambling. Prevention strategies are intended to increase protective factors and reduce risk factors for addiction in the population as a whole, and within specific groups. AHS prevention efforts involve many partners and focus on parents, schools, workplaces and community groups working to address local issues.

Alcohol and the Workplace

Alcohol can have a distinct influence on workplace safety, performance or productivity and overall workplace culture. Alcohol is unique as a psychoactive substance, in that it is used recreationally and can be used safely and legally. This complicates the task of discussing alcohol policy with employers and creating an alcohol policy. Employers have a duty under Occupational Health and Safety to provide a safe workplace. Alcohol can directly and significantly contribute to workplace dangers.
Treatment: A Range of Services

AHS offers a full range of treatment services to help Albertans improve their health, learn new life skills and recover from the harmful effects of substance use and problem gambling. Treatment programs are available for adults, youth and families who are experiencing serious problems with alcohol, other drugs or gambling.

The Alberta Alcohol Strategy

Albertans are concerned about the harmful effects of alcohol and the significant social and economic toll it takes. In an effort to reduce that harm and ultimately create a culture of moderation, the Alberta Gaming and Liquor Commission, Alberta Health Services and Alberta Health, in consultation with numerous government departments and community stakeholders, have developed the Alberta Alcohol Strategy (AAS). These are the AAS strategic priorities:

- Promote healthy perceptions, attitudes and behaviours toward alcohol use.
- Ensure social responsibility in the production, distribution, regulation and service of beverage alcohol.
- Foster the development of context-specific alcohol policies.
- Enhance the province-wide continuum of alcohol treatment services.
- Expand harm-reduction programs for alcohol.
- Support enforcement efforts to reduce alcohol-related crime.
Conclusion

Alcohol use in Alberta is the norm. But within this norm there is room for alcohol use to shift from hazardous use to more moderate and responsible use. Cultural standards are typically formed by common practice and commonly held beliefs and attitudes towards alcohol use. This is where a shift toward responsible use must begin. Children and youth observe the behaviour of adults and are exposed to messages about alcohol promoted through the media. What drinking culture do you want to see in Alberta?

Alberta Health Services offers a wide range of services for individuals looking for help for someone they care about, or for themselves. For more information, and to find an addictions services office near you, call the Addiction Helpline at 1-866-332-2322. It’s free, confidential and available 24 hours a day.
More information means informed decisions

Well-informed people will be more conscious of the harmful effects of excessive drinking, and will be aware that if they choose to drink alcohol, drinking in moderation is a healthier choice.

For copies: AHS staff and allied health professionals can download digital copies from under the “Resources” tab at: www.albertahealthservices.ca/amhresources. Allied health professionals should contact their local Addiction and Mental Health office to access hard copies.

Thank you

AHS would like to thank our allied health professionals at Éduc’alcool for their contribution to this series.
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.