

HEALTH AWARENESS

ALCOHOL



The consumption of alcoholic beverages has been a part of cultures dating back thousands and thousand of years. There is no denying the enjoyment of both flavor and the feelings of well being that sharing a few drinks with friends can bring. Alcohol is available everywhere and not very expensive, it's part of the way we celebrate and relax. But alcohol has a dark side too, and with the added stresses and isolation of the world today, it's very easy to find that the habit of one or two beers after work has expanded to a six-pack - and health and relationships are suffering.

Alcohol abuse is a common problem in the forestry industry of British Columbia. The devastating effects of the regular consumption of excess alcohol on the body are clear, as is the increased risk for serious worksite incidents. This article will help you understand how much alcohol is safe to drink, how to watch for signs of alcohol use disorder and what the effects of excess alcohol consumption are. At the end of the article you'll find some resources that can help you evaluate your alcohol intake and where to go for help if you or someone you know is consuming too much alcohol.

Facts:

- In general, British Columbians consume about 4% more alcohol than the average Canadian.
- The average intake of alcohol per person in 2019/2020 was calculated to be 537 bottles of beer a year, or just under 1.5 servings per day (regular strength 5% 341 mL bottles), increasing to 2 servings per day by March 2020. These data underestimate the actual consumption because they are based on sales of alcohol and the total population of BC over the age of 15 years, so they include many people who don't actually consume alcohol, and don't include consumption of home made beer, wine and spirits.
- 21-25% of Canadians aged 18-54 reported an increase in alcohol intake with the COVID-19 pandemic. The main reasons for the increase were a lack of regular schedule (51%), boredom (49%) and stress (44%). This follows on the increase in substance use that usually occurs when stress levels are higher.
- There are more people hospitalized in Canada due to the direct effects of alcohol toxicity than for heart attacks. BC has the highest rate of all the provinces at 361 alcohol-related hospitalizations every day per 100,000 people. There are also regional differences with higher rates in more remote areas like northern BC at 532 alcohol-related hospitalizations every day per 100,000 people.
- More than half of all substance use hospitalizations are due to alcohol, but alcohol is responsible for 75% of substance use deaths.

What to expect:

- Regular consumption of more than the recommended servings of alcohol will affect every aspect of your life including your appearance, relationships, ability to do good work, financial, emotional and physical well being.
- Alcohol is highly addictive. Dependence can creep up on you without being obvious.
- It can be hard to ask for help. 50% of people with substance use disorders say that concern about what other people will say prevents them from asking for help.

What to expect:

- Many serious illnesses are much more common in people who regularly consume alcohol and the risk for these diseases increases directly as the number of drinks consumed goes up.
- The risk of premature death due to cancers of the mouth and throat is increased by 20-40% with one serving of alcohol per day, 96% with two servings per day and 368% with 5-6 servings per day.
- For diseases like stroke and liver failure the risks are different for men and women. For example the increased risk of premature death due to liver failure in men rises from 26% with one serving of alcohol per day to 59% with two servings to 254% with 5-6 servings. In women these numbers are much higher at 139% for one serving per day, 242% for two and 666% for 5-6 servings/day.
- The risk of chronic diseases like diabetes and high blood pressure increase with alcohol consumption. Drinking more than the recommended weekly levels also increases the risk for problems with learning and memory, depression and anxiety, as well as work and family life.

What you can do:

- Figure out how much alcohol you are actually consuming. It's trickier than you think because the size of the drink and the type of beverage matters a lot. For example, a pint of 5% beer actually contains 1.7 servings of alcohol and a glass of wine, two servings. The size of one serving of beer is only 341 ml (12 oz), wine 142 ml (5 oz) and hard liquor 43 ml (1.5 oz). If you drink a higher proof version of your beverage, the size of a single serving goes down.
- Keep your intake of alcohol to less than 15 servings a week or 3 standard size drinks per day for men, 10 servings a week or 2 drinks per day for women. This difference is due to body size, so smaller stature people need to lower their intake from these recommendations for low-risk alcohol consumption.
- Other drugs (prescription or recreational) can interact with alcohol, so it's important to make sure that there isn't a harmful effect, or that the alcohol doesn't reduce the effectiveness of a medication. If you are unsure about something you are using ask your pharmacist to check, they can provide free, confidential information.
- The speed with which alcohol is consumed is also important. Drinking your daily intake in less than two hours raises your risk of incidents including injury and violence.
- Set limits for yourself and stick to them. Doing this together with your family or a buddy will greatly increase your chance of success. And it's not a sign of weakness, in fact it is a sign of courage and great modelling for your kids.
- Plan non-drinking days every week to avoid developing a habit.
- For every drink of alcohol, have one non-alcoholic drink and be sure to eat before and while you are drinking to help process the alcohol consumed.
- If you find yourself thinking constantly about your next drink, needing more alcohol to feel the effects, taking a long time to recover after drinking, not wanting to engage in activities except consuming alcohol or suffering blackouts, reach out to your primary care physician, friend or employer for help. There are good programs and people that can help you, your life and the lives of the people you love depend on it. Again, it is NOT a weakness to ask for help, rather it is a sign of strength and courage! It's much easier to ignore the problem than it is to face it.

What Employers and Supervisors can do:

- Set a clear worksite policy for the consumption of alcohol
- Make information about the risks of alcohol consumption easily available in your worksite.
- Include the impact of alcohol on the risk of injury and general health as a topic for crew talks or educational events.
- Address the stigma associated with alcohol use disorder by encouraging open conversation and mentorship programs by recovering alcoholics.
- Use a buddy system to watch for signs of high alcohol intake. They include personality changes, increased anger and anxiety, avoiding friends and not participating in hobbies, neglecting responsibilities, engaging in secretive behaviours, flu like symptoms, increased number of accidents and denial of the problem. If you observe someone struggling with alcohol reach out to your health and safety team or local health providers for assistance in making a plan to support them.
- Consider making company social events alcohol free.
- The public support systems for people suffering from alcohol use disorder have some gaps. For successful treatment for your employees consider building an in-house program as part of your benefit package with mental health and substance use supports.

More information:

How much is one serving of alcohol?

https://www.ccsa.ca/sites/default/files/2020-07/2012-Canada-Low-Risk-Alcohol-Drinking-Guidelines-Brochure-en_0.pdf

Free posters of serving sizes and recommendations about alcohol intake:

<https://cml-kml.ca/en/alcohol/download-high-res-posters/>

Facts about alcohol:

<https://www.healthyfamiliesbc.ca/home/articles/topic/alcohol-sense>

Self-assessment tool to evaluate your risk level of alcohol consumption and building a plan for healthy alcohol consumption habits:

https://www.ccsa.ca/sites/default/files/2019-08/CCSA-Knowing-Your-Limits-with-Alcohol-Guide-2019-en_0.pdf

Substance use toolkit for trades:

<https://www.ccsa.ca/sites/default/files/2021-08/CCSA-Substance-Use-Workplace-Employers-Employees-Trades-Toolkit-2021-en.pdf>

How to identify and help a colleague / employee struggling with alcohol use:

<https://www.albertahealthservices.ca/assets/healthinfo/AddictionsSubstanceAbuse/if-wrk-its-our-bus-someone-at-work.pdf>

BC Mental Health and Addictions Services: bcmhsus.ca/our-services

Alcoholics Anonymous: bcyukonaa.org

Al Anon: bcyukon-al-anon.org