



## Alcohol Is Not the Friend You Think It Is

By Dr. Delia Roberts

Over the summer of 2021 it seemed as though things were looking up. The forestry industry was booming and COVID-19 infection rates were declining. But instead of decreasing stress in our communities, a very disturbing trend was taking place. In just one week in August in a small, rural BC hospital, emergency admissions due to complications of alcohol consumption were shockingly high - and many of those patients work in the forestry industry.

To understand how this happened, we looked at the Canadian statistics for alcohol consumption. Throughout 2019/2020, the average intake of alcohol per person in BC was amongst the highest of all provinces at almost 550 bottles of beer a year. This works out to just under 1.5 servings per day increasing to 2 servings per day by March 2020. The actual average consumption of alcohol by those that drink is undoubtedly higher since the numbers were based on provincial alcohol sales divided by BC's total population of people aged 15 and over. These averaged numbers included both drinkers and non-drinkers and didn't account for alcohol purchased outside the province or home-made beer, wine and spirits.

We do know that during stressful times alcohol consumption increases. This trend has been a troubling reality during the COVID-19 pandemic. 25% of Canadians aged 18-54 reported an increase in their alcohol intake with the main reasons being a lack of regular schedule (51%), boredom (49%) and stress (44%).

So, what's the big deal you might say? A few drinks now and then doesn't seem that bad. Alcohol is legal; it's available pretty much anywhere, anytime. It's inexpensive, and is a basic part of our culture! We relax, make friends, celebrate and grieve with alcohol. And beer is mostly water anyhow... right? But the severity of the problem becomes clear when we look at hospital admissions. More Canadians are hospitalized for alcohol related reasons than for heart attacks. And closer to home, in areas like northern Vancouver Island and other rural locations in central and northern BC, hospital admissions for alcohol related causes are more than 30% higher than elsewhere in the province. These admissions are also deadly - about half of substance abuse hospitalizations are due to alcohol, but it's alcohol, not opiates, that causes 75% of the deaths.

### How much alcohol is too much?

'Low-risk' drinking guidelines have been set by the Canadian Center on Substance Use and Addiction to help people know how much alcohol they can consume without experiencing negative side effects. The guidelines are

based on how long it takes the average person to clear alcohol out of their blood stream, but the way our bodies respond to alcohol varies based on our genetics and our current physiology (weight, age, how recently we've eaten, fatigue, dehydration, other medications and drugs, how quickly the alcohol is consumed, how long it's been since we last drank and so on). The guidelines are meant to be maximum amounts, not permission to consume that much every day. They are also based on a specific amount of alcohol, so the volume that makes up one serving varies based on the potency of that particular beverage. Beer, for example, has a lower alcohol content than hard liquor, but there are many different kinds of beer, ranging from 2.3% alcohol for a light beer all the way up to 17% alcohol for some craft brews.

A standard recommended serving size is actually much smaller than what most people are used to:

- 341 ml (12 oz) of 5% alcohol for beer, cider or cooler. This makes the pint glass of beer at the bar 1.7 servings.
- 142 ml (5 oz) of wine at 12% alcohol. Most wine glasses are 10 oz which is equivalent to two servings.
- 43 ml (1.5 oz) of spirits like vodka, rum, whisky, or gin at 40% alcohol. One shot is 3 oz or two servings.

In Canada, the low-risk guidelines recommend no more than two standard drinks per day for adult women, and three for men – but the recommended maximum amount per week is ten for women and 15 for men. The recommendations also state that there should be days where no alcohol is consumed.

It's also important to consider that the difference in the guidelines for men and women are based on average body size. This means smaller men may exceed their safe consumption target even when following these recommendations. Similarly, younger, and older individuals, as well as certain ethnic populations do not process the

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alcohol as quickly and effectively, and therefore could easily exceed a healthy level of alcohol consumption, even if they follow the general guidelines.

## What alcohol does inside your body

The reason that it's so important to limit alcohol intake is that flat out - alcohol consumption above low-risk amounts increases your risk of death, and by a substantial amount.

This mainly happens in two ways.

Firstly, alcohol affects your judgement, increasing risk-taking behaviours, while at the same time slowing your ability to respond to the risk. Visual information processing and coordination are impaired, reaction time is slowed and you don't process information clearly. For most forestry sector jobs, this is a recipe for disaster. The inherent risk of the job means that anything that impairs your ability to stay vigilant, make good decisions and react quickly can lead to injury and death - to yourself, your coworkers and if you are driving on a road or highway, the public. Given that alcohol can be detected in the body 24 hours following consumption, it seems that even eight hours is not long enough to wait between consuming alcohol and going to work.

Secondly, the chronic effects of alcohol on almost every system of your body are also extremely serious. Here are a few of the most pronounced effects:

- **Brain:** Alcohol affects memory, mood, and your ability to maintain relationships. It decreases the amount of grey matter in your brain. It's addictive, both physically and psychologically and with regular heavy use will take over your life.
- **Heart:** Alcohol causes irregular heartbeats and damages heart muscle. Drinkers are twice as likely to have a heart attack than non-drinkers.
- **Cardiovascular system:** Alcohol increases the likelihood of developing high blood pressure and consuming more than two drinks a day increases the risk of having a stroke.

- **Liver:** Alcohol is processed in the liver, heavy use causes fatty deposits and inflammation and diseases like cirrhosis and hepatitis, but here, the risks are different for women than for men. 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.
- **Pancreas:** Alcohol causes the production of toxic substances in the pancreas that cause inflammation and interfere with the normal function of this organ.
- **Cancer:** A number of cancers occur much more frequently in people who regularly drink alcohol, and the more you drink, the greater the risk. For example, 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.
- **Immune System:** Alcohol impairs the immune system both in the short and long term. Your ability to fight off infections is decreased for 24 hours after consuming more than four servings of alcohol, and in the long term, the likelihood of developing serious diseases like pneumonia, tuberculosis and COVID-19 is increased in people who regularly consume alcohol.

## When is there a problem?

It's not easy to take stock of your drinking habits. The forestry industry is made up of men and women who work hard. Being tough is part of the job, and it keeps you going when the days are long and the weather and conditions are pretty darn lousy. But it also makes it difficult 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. And even if you do recognize that you or someone you know has a problem,

finding help is not easy. Unfortunately, it can be especially hard to find professional support in rural BC.

In order to address the problem, the BCFSC has developed a new set of Healthy Worker resources focussing on Alcohol Use that includes a short background piece, poster and crew talk, offering practical suggestions for creating a supportive worksite as well as links to some local agencies that can help. We've also included some additional Alcohol Use Support Resources you can access the end of this article.

It's worth it to stop and take an objective look at your drinking habits. Actually, keep track of how much alcohol you consume for a month and encourage your friends, co-workers and family to do the same. Check out the suggestions for how to create healthy drinking habits and what to do if you are having difficulty managing your alcohol consumption or know someone else who is. It is possible to step back from letting alcohol control you and your family, and keep those you care for safe.

## Alcohol Use Support Resources:

### Alcohol Serving Recommendations

### Alcohol Self Assessment Tool:

Evaluate your risk level of alcohol consumption and plan for successful building of healthy alcohol consumption habits.

### Identifying Alcohol Use Disorder:

Information about how to identify and help a colleague or employee struggling with alcohol use.

### BC Mental Health and Addictions Services

### Alcoholics Anonymous

### Al Anon

BCFSC Healthy Worker Series:

### Alcohol Use 🍷