



Alcohol

background information for educators

What is alcohol?

- Alcohol is a drug.
- It is the most used drug in Ontario and Canada.
- Alcohol is the common name for ethanol and is also referred to as booze or liquor.
- It is found in beer, wine, cider, and spirits. It is made by fermenting or distilling grain, fruit, or vegetables.
- Alcohol is a depressant which slows down the function of the brain and thought processes. It can also affect other bodily functions, such as breathing and heart rate.

References:

[Alcohol | CAMH](#)

[Canada's Guidance on Alcohol and Health | Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction \(ccsa.ca\)](#)

Alcohol products

- Alcohol can have many appearances, tastes, and strengths due to the different ingredients and processes used to make them.
- Drinking stronger alcoholic drinks increases the risk of becoming drunk and needing medical help.

Types of alcohol products



Fermented drinks

- Fermented drinks like beer, wine and cider have lower alcohol levels.
- These drinks vary in strength, typically ranging from 0.5% to 20%.



Distilled alcoholic drinks

- Distilled alcoholic drinks are often referred to as spirits or hard liquor (e.g., whisky and vodka).
- They have a high amount of alcohol from 25% or more.
- These are created when fermented drinks go through a process called distillation to remove water. This process increases the alcohol concentration.



Flavoured, purified alcohol drinks

- These are sweetened, pre-mixed drinks that can have a high alcohol content (e.g., Rev Up and Four Loko).
- The sugar and added flavours can make them appealing and dangerous for youth.
- Because these drinks often come in single serving containers and the sweet taste hides the alcohol flavor, it can be easy for youth to accidentally drink too much.



Mixing alcohol with energy drinks

- Energy drinks are highly caffeinated, sweetened non-alcoholic drinks that are popular with youth.
- Drinking them can cause health issues for youth including anxiety and headaches, seizures and even death.
- Mixing alcohol with energy drinks significantly increases these health risks.

Reference:

[Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction \(2022\). Understanding Substance Use: Educator's Guide](#)

Why is youth alcohol use a concern?



- Alcohol is the most common mind-altering drug used by youth and young adults.
- Alcohol use is socially acceptable, but drinking any amount of alcohol has risks, especially for youth because their bodies and brains are still developing.
- Drinking alcohol can negatively impact how the brain develops which may result in risky, impulsive behaviours and injuries.
- Starting to drink alcohol at a young age significantly increases an individual's risk of experiencing both mental and physical health issues, which can lead to chronic illnesses and mental health conditions later in life.



It is important for youth to delay alcohol use for as long as possible.



Alcohol use and youth behaviours

Youth may drink alcohol for different reasons, like:

- to have a good time and relax
- to relieve stress
- to deal with boredom
- to be social
- to fit in or deal with peer pressure



Youth are more likely than adults to participate in high-risk drinking behaviors, putting them at increased risk for:

- immediate consequences such as injuries, blackouts, and alcohol poisoning.
- long term effects such as issues with brain development, as well as physical and mental health issues.
- being victimized by or perpetrating violence, which can include bullying, gang violence, sexual aggression, and assaults.



High risk drinking behaviours

These behaviours put youth at greater risk of experiencing negative impacts related to alcohol consumption. The following are some of the most common high-risk drinking behaviours with youth.

- **Binge drinking** is consuming five or more standard drinks on one occasion for males, or four or more standard drinks on one occasion for females, and is a pattern of consumption that results in legal impairment (i.e., a blood alcohol concentration (BAC) >0.08%) for most people. It can lead to alcohol poisoning which can result in brain damage or even death if not treated quickly.
- **Pre-drinking** is defined as consuming alcohol before attending a party, event, or bar. Pre-drinking poses risks because it occurs in uncontrolled settings, often leading to intoxication (which is the appearance or sensation of being drunk) and negative outcomes (e.g., blackouts, injuries, and alcohol poisoning).
- **Drinking Games** involve rules that determine when and how much participants should drink. This can result in excessive alcohol consumption and severe intoxication.
- **Polysubstance use** is when someone uses more than one drug at a time (e.g., alcohol and other drugs). It can cause harmful effects like masking the effects of alcohol with cannabis or caffeine, which can lead to overconsumption.

References:

[Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction \(2022\). Understanding Substance Use: Educator's Guide](#)
[Canada's Guidance on Alcohol and Health | Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction \(ccsa.ca\)](#)

Did you know?

Alcohol concentration

- In Canada, a standard drink is 17.05 millilitres or 13.45 grams of pure alcohol.

A standard drink means:

Beer

341 ml
(12 oz)
of beer;
5% alcohol



or

Cooler, cider, ready-to-drink

341 ml (12 oz)
of drinks;
5% alcohol



or

Wine

142 ml (5 oz)
of wine;
12% alcohol



or

Spirits

(whisky, vodka, gin, etc.)
43 ml (1.5 oz) of
spirits; 40% alcohol

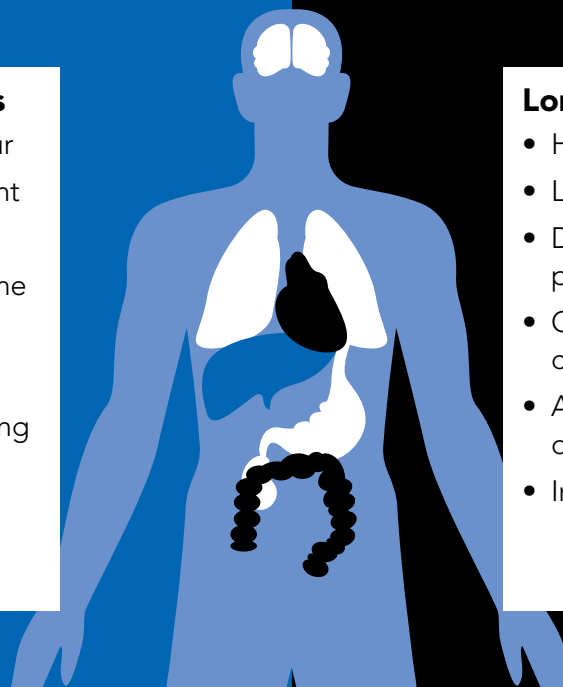


Health effects

The effects of alcohol differ for everyone and depend on factors like gender, age, body composition, food intake, fatigue, and general health.

Short term effects

- Impulsive behaviour
- Impaired judgement
- Aggressiveness
- Slowed reaction time
- Slurred speech
- Blurred vision
- Nausea and vomiting
- Impaired memory
- Injuries
- Blackouts



Long term effects

- Heart problems
- Liver problems
- Digestive tract problems
- Cancer (e.g., breast, colon, pancreas)
- Anxiety and depression
- Infertility

Alcohol laws impacting Ontario

- In Ontario, the minimum legal drinking age is 19 years old. This is not consistent across Canada, where the [provincial minimum drinking ages](#) vary between 18 and 19.
- The blood alcohol concentration (BAC) limit in Ontario is 0.08%; however, there is zero-tolerance for drivers holding a G1, G2, M1, or M2 licence, those under 21, driving a vehicle that requires an A-F driver's licence, Commercial Vehicle Operator's Registration (CVOR), or driving a road-building machine ([Impaired driving | ontario.ca](#)).
- In Ontario, the [Liquor Licence and Control Act, 2019](#) makes it illegal to sell or supply liquor to any person who is or appears to be intoxicated.
- Drinking alcohol in public places (e.g., parks or streets) is prohibited unless designated areas or events allow it. Municipalities may have specific policies regarding alcohol consumption on municipally owned properties. For example, Brampton has a [Municipal Alcohol Policy](#) regulating alcohol use on municipal properties.

References:

[Canada's Guidance on Alcohol and Health | Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction \(ccsa.ca\)](#)

[Health risks of alcohol - Canada.ca](#)

[Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction \(2022\). Understanding Substance Use: Educator's Guide](#)

Myths and facts

Myth	Fact
"Alcohol gives you energy."	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Alcohol is a depressant. It slows down a person's ability to think, speak, and move. Alcoholic drinks can be mixed with other drinks (e.g., energy drinks, pop) that have caffeine. Because caffeine is a stimulant, this can cause a person to temporarily feel more energetic.
"Drugs are a bigger problem than alcohol."	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Alcohol is a drug. It is associated with thousands of deaths, hospitalizations, trauma, and social problems in Ontario each year. Alcohol use costs Ontario billions of dollars each year. In 2020, the estimated cost of alcohol related harms (i.e., emergency department visits, hospitalizations, and deaths) in Ontario was \$7.11 billion (2023 CMOH Annual Report). Alcohol can damage every organ in the body, and there is a risk that it can permanently alter youth brain development.
"Youth can't have problems with alcohol because they haven't been drinking long enough."	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Alcohol is the most used drug by youth. Many youth drink alcohol in an experimental or occasional manner. Some youth may develop problematic use and experience alcohol-related harms. They may find it difficult to control their use of alcohol and develop a strong need or craving to drink. They may want to stop drinking but can't.
"People who drink too much only hurt themselves."	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Drinking alcohol can increase the risk of harm to yourself and others, including injuries, violence, emotional pain, and broken relationships.
"Alcohol affects males and females the same way."	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> There are physiological differences between males and females: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Females are more susceptible to the effects of alcohol because female bodies contain less water and more fat than male bodies, so they are less able to 'dilute' the alcohol. Females also have less of the enzyme (dehydrogenase) that helps break down alcohol in the stomach before it reaches the bloodstream. This can result in females having a higher blood alcohol concentration (BAC) than males with the same amount of alcohol consumed.
"Drinking different types of alcohol on one occasion (e.g., beer, wine, and spirits) will make a person more drunk than just sticking to one type of alcohol."	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A person's level of intoxication is measured by their BAC, not the type of drink they had. A higher BAC is what leads to alcohol impairment (a reduced ability to think clearly or perform certain activities) and intoxication (which is the appearance or sensation of being drunk).

References:

[Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction \(2022\). Understanding Substance Use: Educator's Guide](#)
[2023 CMOH Annual Report - English](#)
[Canada's Guidance on Alcohol and Health | Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction \(ccsa.ca\)](#)

Statistics on alcohol use

- [Ontario Student Drug Use and Mental Health Survey \(OSDUHS\) – Centre for Addition and Mental Health \(CAMH\)](#)
- [Peel Public Health: Health Status Data - Region of Peel](#)
- [Balancing Act: An All of Society Approach to Substance Use and Harms \(2023 Annual Report of the Chief Medical Officer of Health of Ontario to the Legislative Assembly of Ontario\)](#)

Related resources and supports

- [Alcohol use](#) - Health Canada
- [Youth Vaping, Substance Use, and Technology Dependence Program \(YOUTH-VAST\)](#) - CAMH
- Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction (CCSA)
 - [Educators Guide](#) (resource type(s): Guide and videos)
 - [Drinking Less is Better Alcohol and Youth Poster](#) (resource type(s): poster for youth)
- Mother Against Drunk Driving (MADD) Canada
 - [School Presentations – in person and online](#) (resource type(s): school resources)
- [Ontario Students Against Impaired Driving \(OSAID\)](#) - Impaired Driving Activities (resource type(s): School wide activities)
- [Kids Help Phone](#) - Kids Help Phone provides confidential support and counseling with various issues such as substance use and more