

What Older Adults Need to Know About Drinking Alcohol



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Aging and Alcohol

Our bodies change as we age. Over time, we accumulate more body fat and less muscle mass and water than when we were younger.

Because of this, our bodies break down alcohol more slowly as we get older, which means the alcohol stays in our bodies for longer periods, and its effects last longer. The amount of alcohol in your blood after one drink is higher now than it would have been when you were younger.

Health Risks

Older adults are more likely to have hearing and eyesight problems as well as slower reaction times, compared with when they were younger. This can place you at higher risk for falls, broken bones, and accidents when drinking.

Older adults are also more likely to be taking medications (e.g., pain killers, sedatives, antidepressants) for illnesses that become more common as we age. Alcohol may interact with these medications in ways that can be quite dangerous. Talk with your healthcare provider about all of the medications that you take and how they might interact with alcohol. These kinds of conversations can help you stay safe.

DID YOU KNOW?

Depression and alcohol use can sometimes happen together. Your doctor can help you find out if you have depression and can help you get the right treatment if you do.

What Is Considered One Drink?

In Canada, a standard alcoholic drink contains 17.05 mL or 13.45 grams of pure alcohol. Below is a breakdown of what this is equal to in common alcoholic drinks:

- + 330 ml (12 ounces) 1 bottle of beer, cider, or cooler, at 5% alcohol
- + 142 ml (5 ounces) 1 glass of wine, at 12% alcohol
- + 43 ml (1.5 ounces) of distilled alcohol, such as rye, gin, rum, vodka, etc., at 40% alcohol

Standard Drinks

A 'standard' drink in Canada is any drink that contains about 13.45 grams of "pure" alcohol



DID YOU KNOW?

Drinking starts to become risky for the onset or worsening of chronic diseases like diabetes, cancers, high blood pressure and stroke when people drink more than recommended drinking limits for their gender and age.

What Are The Alcohol Limits for Older Adults?

Below are recommended drinking limits for adults over the age of 65:

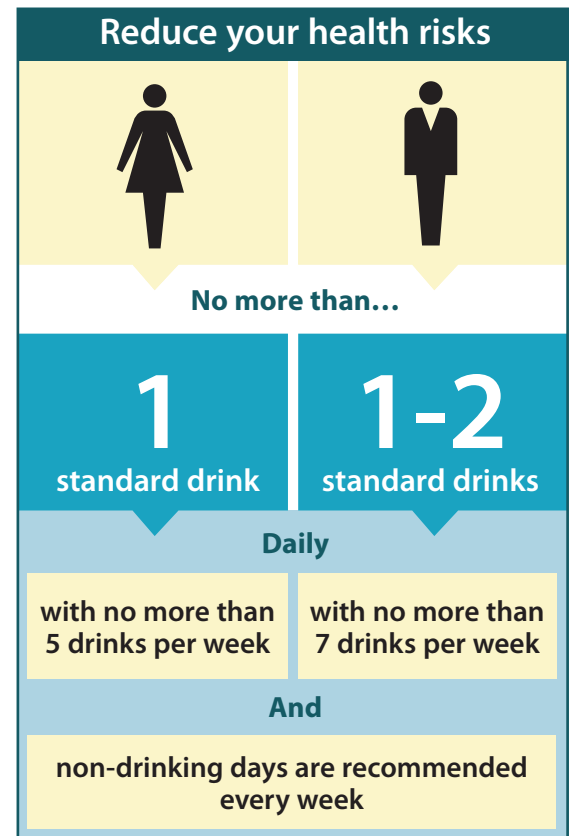
- + For women, no more than 1 standard alcoholic drink per day, with no more than 5 alcoholic drinks per week in total
- + For men, no more than 1-2 standard alcoholic drinks per day, with no more than 7 alcoholic drinks per week in total

Keep in mind this is only a rule of thumb. Everyone is different. Your age, body weight, and other health conditions will all impact how you respond to alcohol. As you reach your 70s, 80s, 90s, consider decreasing your alcohol consumption beyond these guidelines and perhaps even not drinking at all (especially if you have health conditions).

When Should I Not Drink?

There are times when you should not consume ANY alcohol. These include (but are not limited to):

- + Before or while driving
- + When working with tools or machinery
- + When using medications or other drugs that interact with alcohol (e.g., opioids, benzodiazepines, antidepressants, or cannabis)
- + When getting ready for sleep
- + Before making important decisions
- + When responsible for the care of other people



Signs of a Possible Alcohol Problem

Talk with a healthcare provider if you have experienced two or more of these symptoms in the last year, as this may indicate you have a problem with your alcohol consumption that could benefit from medical attention:

- ☐ Drinking a larger amount of alcohol than you intended to
- ☐ Drinking for a longer period of time than you intended to
- ☐ Wanting to cut down or control your drinking but finding it difficult
- ☐ Spending a lot of time talking and thinking about drinking alcohol
- ☐ Feeling like you must always drink alcohol
- ☐ Having difficulty maintaining responsibilities at home or at work because of alcohol use
- ☐ Drinking even though it has negative effects on personal life and/or on mental and physical health
- ☐ Drinking when it is not safe to do so, such as when driving or when at risk of a fall
- ☐ Feeling the need to drink more alcohol to feel it working
- ☐ Feeling like the alcohol does not work as well as it used to
- ☐ Drinking alcohol because you feel sick if you do not*



**** If people who are alcohol dependent suddenly stop drinking, they may experience withdrawal. Alcohol withdrawal can make a person seriously ill. It can even be life-threatening. A healthcare provider can help you reduce alcohol use while at the same time minimizing the risk of having any withdrawal symptoms.***

Tips for Safer Drinking Habits

If you choose to drink alcohol, here are some ways to help reduce the risks:

- + **Slow down.** Take your time and savour each drink.
- + **Drink less.** Choose drinks with lower alcohol levels or dilute them with water or juice.
- + **Do not drink on an empty stomach.** Eat a meal and drink water or other non-alcoholic, non-caffeinated beverages BEFORE and DURING the time you are drinking alcohol.
- + **Avoid alcohol when you need to stay sharp.** Do not drink if you will be engaging in possibly dangerous activities or situations, including driving.



Where Can I Get More Information?

Websites

Canadian Coalition for Seniors' Mental Health (CCSMH)
ccsmh.ca

Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction
(CCSA) [ccsa.ca /alcohol](http://ccsa.ca/alcohol)

Resources

*What older adults, their families and friends need to know
about alcohol*

By the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH)
[camh.ca/en/health-info/guides-and-publications/
alcohol-use-in-older-adults](http://camh.ca/en/health-info/guides-and-publications/alcohol-use-in-older-adults)



Canadian Coalition
for Seniors' Mental Health

Coalition Canadienne pour
la Santé Mentale des
Personnes Âgées

ccsmh.ca

This brochure is adapted from the Canadian Coalition for Seniors' Mental Health (CCSMH) *Canadian Guidelines on Alcohol Use Disorder Among Older Adults*.

Disclaimer: This brochure is intended for information purposes only. It is not intended to offer medical advice or be interpreted or used as a standard of medical practice.