

alcohol and women

supporting health and life



Why are the weekly drinking limits lower for women?

In general, women are more vulnerable to the effects of alcohol than men for several reasons. On average, women weigh less than men, and smaller people reach higher blood alcohol levels than larger people. In addition, pound for pound, women have less water in their bodies than men do – even if a woman and a man of the same weight drink an equal amount of alcohol, the woman’s blood alcohol concentration will be higher. Thirdly, women have less alcohol-metabolizing enzymes and digest alcohol in the stomach differently than men.

The guidelines are a starting place for women to assess their individual drinking practices. Exceeding these amounts can potentially lead to a wide range of short- and long-term health and social problems, including alcohol dependence.

Low risk drinking guidelines are based on research on the average person, but the effects of alcohol vary greatly from one woman to another. Some of the factors that can influence the way individuals respond to alcohol include weight and size, genetics and family history, mixing alcohol with other substances or medications, and overall stress, hunger and lack of sleep.

Women face particular health risks and realities

Heavy alcohol use in women can lead to serious and in some cases unique health problems. Osteoporosis, breast cancer, heart disease and reproductive problems are all associated with drinking by women. Women are more susceptible to alcohol-related heart disease than men. Women who drink alcohol are more likely to develop alcoholic hepatitis than men. Mood altering drugs interact with alcohol to increase risk, and women are twice as likely to be prescribed these medications. As well, women are at greater risk of experiencing gender-based violence such as sexual assault when drinking heavily.

Everyone needs to understand the specific health risks of drinking for girls and women.

Canada’s Low-Risk Alcohol Drinking Guidelines for women

- On a single occasion, no more than 3 standard drinks
- In any week, no more than 10 drinks, with no more than 2 drinks a day most days
- Plan to have some non-drinking days per week
- It is safest not to drink during pregnancy

According to the Canadian Addiction Survey

- 76% of Canadian women reported drinking alcohol in the past 12 months
- Most women drink in moderation. However, 15% of women exceeded low-risk drinking guidelines in the past 12 months

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