The Truth about Alcohol in Durham Region

How Much is too Much

Does Alcohol Cause Cancer

The Business of Alcohol
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Foreword

Alcohol is no ordinary commodity. When it comes to alcohol, the key is moderation. With this report we hope to encourage community members to continue talking in order to address the impacts of alcohol-related harms in Durham Region. In developing this report, we compiled evidence-based information as well as input from the community.

Durham Region Health Department would like to thank all those who took the time to share their personal stories and comments with us.

“Perhaps [I have] not personally [been affected] but I have heard of multiple drunk driving incidents, cancer related to alcohol consumption and sexual abuse when under the influence. In general, partying and binge drinking in teens is harmful for their development.” (Durham resident)
Introduction

Selecting a perfect wine pairing for a meal, having a cold beer on the patio to unwind, or sipping a cocktail to celebrate with friends are just a few of the occasions we choose to drink. We drink on these occasions and on others for enjoyment, to socialize, to celebrate, to relax, and to cope. In Durham Region, almost 80% of adults consume alcohol.11

Given the many positive associations we have with alcohol, it may be surprising to hear that it comes with risks, even with moderate consumption. Only 1/3 of Canadians are aware that moderate drinking can lead to 7 different types of cancer.13 Alcohol can also increase the risk of heart disease, stroke and type 2 diabetes, and may contribute to mental health problems such as depression and suicide.

Alcohol also impacts people’s lives through serious negative effects including injuries and deaths caused by impaired driving, assaults, property damage, domestic violence, child neglect, abuse, and Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD).
Drinking Trends in Durham Region

• More than half of adults aged 19 and over, reported drinking alcohol in excess of Canada’s Low-Risk Alcohol Drinking Guidelines\(^{11}\)

• 1 in 5 adults are heavy drinkers; defined as more than 5 drinks for men and more than 4 drinks for women on a single occasion, one time or more per month\(^{11}\)

• Men (26%) are binge drinking almost twice as much as women (14%) in Durham Region\(^{32}\)

• Men continue to significantly exceed the Low-Risk Drinking Guidelines (67%) as compared to women (36%)\(^{11}\)

• 1 in 4 Durham Region high school students reported drinking hazardously or harmfully, which means that their drinking puts them at risk for current or future physical and social problems\(^{28}\)

• 1 in 4 high school students report binge drinking in the past month\(^{27}\)
Canada’s Low-Risk Alcohol Drinking Guidelines provide a guide for Canadians to help them reduce their long-term health risks from multiple chronic illnesses. These guidelines include the following limits for alcohol consumption:

- Women consume no more than **10 drinks per week**, with no more than **2 drinks a day** on most days;
- Men consume no more than **15 drinks per week**, with no more than **3 drinks a day** on most days.

One **Standard Drink** Equals:

- 341 ml (12 oz) bottle of 5% alcohol beer, cider or cooler
- 43 ml (1.5 oz) shot of 40% hard liquor (vodka, rum, whisky, gin etc.)
- 142 ml (5 oz) glass of 12% wine

Many people are surprised to learn what counts as an actual drink. In Canada, a ‘standard’ drink is any drink that contains about 13.6 grams of “pure” alcohol. Once you know what a standard drink is, you will know how much alcohol you are actually drinking ([Rethinkyourdrinking.ca](http://www.rethinkyourdrinking.ca)).

Reproduced with permission from the Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction 2017.
Heavy drinking is defined as consuming at least 4 or more servings of alcohol on at least one occasion per month in the past year.

For those who want to reduce their risk of cancer, the limits should be lower. The Canadian Cancer Society recommends that:

- Women consume less than 1 drink per day;
- Men consume less than 2 drinks per day.

**Binge Drinking vs. Heavy Drinking**

Binge drinking and heavy drinking are interchangeable terms, with the same definition:

- For women, it is defined as drinking more than 4 drinks on a single occasion, in a relatively short period of time (approximately 2 hours);
- For men, it is defined as drinking more than 5 drinks on a single occasion, in a relatively short period of time (approximately 2 hours).
Alcohol and Your Health

Alcohol is a leading risk factor for death, disease and disability, and is a causal factor in at least 60 types of diseases and injuries. Choosing to drink alcohol is a personal choice; however, many people are unaware of the health risks linked to alcohol. Canada’s Low-Risk Alcohol Drinking Guidelines provide information on how to reduce the risk of alcohol-related harms. These guidelines are “low-risk” not “no-risk”; they set daily limits, not targets. Drinking even small amounts of alcohol can put your health at risk.

“Several times I have responded to individuals that were so intoxicated, they were no longer protecting their own airway.” (First Responder Durham Region)

Immediate Health Effects

Judgment, balance and coordination become impaired as the amount of alcohol in the blood increases. Falls and injuries are a common risk when people drink. Alcohol poisoning can occur when a large amount of alcohol is consumed in a short amount of time. When alcohol poisoning occurs, a person may pass out, choke on their vomit and breathing and body temperature regulation systems can shut down. In some cases, alcohol poisoning can cause death.
Long-term Health Effects

Long-term health effects of alcohol develop over time and often show up later in a person’s life. These chronic diseases can decrease a person’s quality of life and contribute to early death.

Between 2002 and 2014, the number of visits to emergency departments in Durham Region related to the long term health effects of alcohol has doubled.14

“As a resident physician [I know how] alcohol leads to poor outcomes, [especially] for other medical issues.” (Resident Physician Uxbridge Cottage Hospital)

Cancer

Drinking as little as one drink a day increases a person’s risk for seven types of cancer including cancer of the mouth, neck, throat, liver, female breast, colon, and rectum; Results from a Health Unit Survey, have shown that as many as 61% of Durham Region residents are unaware of this risk.31

According to Cancer Care Ontario,10 as many as 3000 cancer deaths could be prevented each year by reducing the amount of alcohol people drink.

“There is very little information made public of the relation between alcohol consumption and cancer/other diseases - I have only just heard of the alcohol/cancer link in the last month.” (Durham Resident)
Heart Disease

Many people have a misunderstanding about the health benefits versus the health harms from drinking alcohol. Research shows that consuming about one drink per day, appears to provide some protection for men and women over 45 years of age from some forms of heart disease and diabetes. However, as the amount of alcohol consumed in a day increases, the risk of physical and mental harms, including a number of cancers, liver disease and depression also increases. Even at one or two drinks per day over a period of time, a person’s risk for any one of several types of cancer increases dramatically.7

It is important to note that any heart health benefits from drinking small amounts of alcohol disappear with binge drinking.6 These health benefits can be achieved without drinking alcohol by being physically active and eating a healthy diet. These lifestyle changes can also help to achieve and maintain a healthy weight, enhance mood and energy levels, cope with stress and improve sleep.

People should not start drinking for possible health benefits as these benefits do not outweigh the health risks associated with alcohol.6
“The availability of alcohol such as wine and beer in our local grocery stores is making it much more difficult for people with substance abuse issues to get and stay sober, my wife is one such person who is struggling with alcohol addiction.” (Durham resident)
Mental Health

Alcohol consumption, especially heavy drinking, has been linked to mental health problems and a substantial number of suicides.\textsuperscript{13,38} Mental health problems can increase a person’s alcohol use if they begin to self-medicate with alcohol to cope with their symptoms. Inversely, if a person is misusing alcohol it can cause major problems in their life which can in turn cause harm to their mental health.\textsuperscript{13,20}

Misusing alcohol includes binge drinking, heavy drinking, alcohol use under the legal drinking age and drinking alcohol during pregnancy.\textsuperscript{15}
Special Concerns

**Drinking and Driving**

According to Statistics Canada, over the past 30 years drinking and driving rates have declined; however, drinking and driving continues to be a special concern. Organizations, such as Durham Region Police Services (DRPS) and Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD), have worked diligently to reduce the rates of drinking and driving. Durham Region Police officers continue to combat impaired driving offences by conducting R.I.D.E. programs over the holidays. During their 2015 RIDE program, Durham Region police stopped 10,017 vehicles, tested 802 drivers and took 276 people off the road for alcohol related offences. The cost of drinking and driving goes beyond death and injury and includes: law enforcement, health and social costs for deaths and injuries, and damage to vehicles. Evidence shows that in addition to enforcement and education, rates of drunk driving can be further reduced by restricting alcohol availability within the community.

In Durham Region, impaired operation of a motor vehicle and related violations decreased by 6.8% from 2014 to 2015.
Underage Drinking

Youth are of special concern when it comes to harms caused by alcohol, as the brain is not fully developed until about age 25. Alcohol use by teens and young adults can damage areas of the brain that control emotions, concentration, impulses, planning and decision making.\(^4\),\(^9\)

Youth are also at risk for serious impacts from alcohol, such as falls, sexual violence, physical assaults, as well as injuries and deaths caused by impaired driving (CPHA Position Paper, 2011). Misuse of alcohol by youth also puts them at greater risk for suicide including thinking about suicide and attempting suicide, as judgment and impulse control become impaired.\(^17\),\(^21\),\(^37\)

In 2015, 14%, approximately 3800 youth in Durham Region reported seriously considering suicide, while 4%, approximately 1100 youth actually attempted suicide.\(^29\),\(^30\)

“Binge drinking in university and high school has to do with peers, fitting in, social anxiety, escaping troubles; There needs to be a lot more discussion with youth around drinking in ways where they do not feel judged, but can be more authentic and honest about why they are drinking.” (Durham resident)

“Most teens are….unaware of the health and developmental effects of alcohol for overall wellness and how it impacts mental and physical health & development.” (Durham resident)
Women and Alcohol

Drinking alcohol puts women at a greater risk of certain alcohol-related illnesses (e.g., breast cancer, stroke, diabetes, high blood pressure, and liver disease) in comparison to men. The main reasons for this increased vulnerability to the harmful effects of alcohol is that women are typically smaller in stature and have a different body composition (i.e., less body water to dilute the consumed alcohol) and fewer enzymes to break down the alcohol. As a result, when drinking the same amount as men, women will have more alcohol in their blood and experience greater physical harm. For example, when consuming one drink per day on average, it is estimated that a woman’s risk of getting liver cirrhosis increases by 139%, compared to 26% for a man. Additionally, the risk of stroke for women is at least double the risk for men when exceeding the limits set in the Low-Risk Drinking guidelines.6

Pregnancy and Alcohol

Women of child-bearing age are an important group to consider when looking at alcohol consumption trends. Canada’s new Low-Risk Alcohol Drinking Guidelines advise that there is no safe amount, and no safe time, to drink alcohol during pregnancy. If a woman drinks alcohol while she is pregnant, her baby may be born with Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder or FASD.26 FASD cannot be cured, has lifelong impacts on
individuals and families and is the leading known cause of preventable developmental disability. Effects, including alcohol-related birth defects, may include a range of physical, brain and central nervous system disabilities, as well as cognitive, behavioral and emotional issues.

Because half of all pregnancies are unplanned, FASD is a risk for women who drink alcohol without knowing they are pregnant or are unaware of the consequences of exposing an unborn baby to alcohol.

- In Durham, 36% of women are drinking in excess of Canada’s Low-Risk Drinking Guidelines.
- In Durham, 14% of women are binge drinking once a month or more.

These findings raise concerns about the number of babies born with FASD. For more information on supports for substance use in pregnancy, refer to durham.ca

Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) is a term that refers to a range of disabilities that result from drinking alcohol during pregnancy. No amount or type of alcohol during pregnancy is considered safe. Drinking alcohol during pregnancy can seriously harm an unborn baby. Each year in Canada, it is estimated that nine babies in every 1,000 are born with FASD.
“I’m concerned that increased availability means increased consumption which can lead to increased motor vehicle collisions, domestic abuse, youth starting to drink sooner, addiction, and the proximity of outlets to homes and families.” (Durham resident)

**Societal Impact**

In addition to the direct impact on a person’s physical health, alcohol also has a ripple effect that can impact individuals, families, workplaces and communities. Alcohol use can lead to FASD, motor vehicle crashes, child neglect, domestic violence – verbal and physical abuse and community violence.38
Alcohol, Health and Socioeconomic Status

Those with more disposable income or a higher socioeconomic status are likely to drink more. However, alcohol-related harms and deaths related to alcohol are much higher in lower income groups. This is partly due to the fact that higher income groups tend to have increased social supports, access to better nutrition and more access to health care.

“I do think alcohol consumption goes hand-in-hand with socioeconomic status and as stress relief for day-to-day stressors…. we need to be more diligent in addressing these and supporting strategies that have impact here.” (Durham First Responder)
Media Influence

Children and youth are exposed to about 300,000 alcohol commercials on television, the internet and on the radio each year.\textsuperscript{23} By using attractive people who seem to be having the time of their life, alcohol marketing leads youth to think about alcohol and drinking in a favourable way.\textsuperscript{23}

**Youth view 45% more beer ads and 27% more liquor ads in magazines than people of legal drinking age.\textsuperscript{1}**

The number of alcohol advertisements currently seen by youth is concerning. Research shows that exposure to alcohol marketing lowers the age that youth start drinking and also increases the amount of alcohol that they drink once they start.\textsuperscript{24} The earlier youth start drinking alcohol, the greater their risk of becoming dependent on alcohol later in life.\textsuperscript{24} Youth tend to be more impulsive, impressionable and vulnerable since their brains are still developing. They are also more likely to focus on what makes them happy in the moment. This makes them much more susceptible to alcohol advertising and can lead to early initiation of alcohol and heavier drinking.

**In 2015, 29% of Durham Region high school students reported trying alcohol before grade 9.\textsuperscript{25}**

A more recent trend in alcohol marketing is the targeting of women. According to author Ann Dowsett Johnston,\textsuperscript{18} women’s rate of alcohol use can be directly related to marketing. She calls this trend “the pinking of the market,” which began in the mid-90’s. Wines with names like Girls’ Night Out\textsuperscript{®,} Skinnygirl\textsuperscript{®}, as well as berry-flavored vodkas and mango coolers – are all aimed at women.
“Alcohol also needs to be regulated as it is heavily promoted to teens and normalized in society through movies and TV shows. It needs to be de-normalized for teens and adults and people need to have the skills to know what a standard drink is and what the recommendations are.” (Durham Resident)

Regulations that Don’t Regulate

Alcohol advertisements in Ontario must follow the guidelines from three regulatory bodies, including Advertising Standards Canada (ASC), Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC) and the Alcohol and Gaming Commission of Ontario (AGCO) (see Appendix A). Currently, the ASC only reviews advertisements for compliance with the guidelines, if someone makes a complaint about a specific advertisement.
The Business of Alcohol

Ontario has a mix of public (LCBO) and private systems involved in the distribution of alcohol. This retail system allows for increased access and availability of alcohol through a number of locations including LCBO storefronts, grocery stores, specialty shops and craft breweries. Over the last few years, the retail system has become increasingly privatized. Access and availability of alcohol has increased within Ontario through sales in grocery stores and online retail sales over the past year. The most recent changes have allowed the sale of Vintners Quality Alliance (VQA) products to be sold at Farmers’ Markets and community festivals.
The Cost of Alcohol

Access and availability to alcohol has been increased as a way to give Ontarian’s greater choice and convenience while supporting the Ontario economy. However, harms related to increased availability and access to alcohol has not been mentioned. Although increased alcohol sales generate revenue for the province, the costs of alcohol are far greater. In 2002, it was estimated that Ontario spent 5.3 billion dollars on alcohol-related health care, law enforcement, corrections, lost productivity, motor vehicle collisions, injuries, and social problems combined. This amount was well above that which was generated from the sale of alcohol.

Evidence shows that as availability of alcohol increases so does consumption and with it, associated harms. For example, in British Columbia in 2002, after alcohol became more widely available, alcohol consumption increased as did alcohol-related harms. In contrast, Saskatchewan has one of the lowest levels of alcohol consumption, as well as the highest government revenue from alcohol sales. In 2010, Saskatchewan implemented a pricing policy to increase the price of higher strength alcohol products. This initiative strongly contributed to a decrease in alcohol consumption, while also increasing revenue by more than nine million dollars.

“It’s a tough question; many people consume alcohol safely and responsibly but there are those who don’t. I’m not in favour of alcohol being sold online or in grocery stores. Making it more freely available implies consumption is a good thing. Those of us who “are responsible consumers” are put at risk by those who aren’t.” (Durham resident)
Reducing Alcohol-Related Harms

There is no one single way to reduce the impacts of alcohol use within a community. Therefore, not all of the harms of alcohol can be addressed at a personal level; a response must include leadership and support at many different levels.35
What You Can Do

• Assess how much you drink; check Canada’s Low-Risk Alcohol Drinking Guidelines at www.ccsa.ca and the Canadian Cancer Guidelines at www.cancer.ca.

• Consider the importance of moderation and how you could reduce your risk for alcohol-related harms.

• Set a goal for yourself by downloading the “Saying When” app available online at www.sayingwhen.com.

• Share the information you learned in this report with others.

• Write to your local politician, such as your local councillor or Member of Provincial Parliament (MPP), and share your thoughts about any of the following:
  
  • Increased availability of alcohol
  • Alcohol advertising and marketing aimed at youth
  • Alcohol advertising and marketing aimed at women

• Create a group of interested community members; invite residents, business owners and politicians to talk about what can be done to address the issue of alcohol.

  • Topics for advocacy could include: modifying the drinking environment; pricing policies; reviewing municipal alcohol policies; or the effects of increased availability.

• Make an advertising complaint related to alcohol marketing; see this website www.crtc.gc.ca for more information.

• Visit Durham.ca/alcohol for more information or call/email the Health Department to discuss your ideas with us.

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What Parents Can Do

- Role model low-risk alcohol use. Youth drinking rates can be reduced, particularly if parents change their own behavior.\textsuperscript{35}
- As a parent, talk to your teen about alcohol use and explain its harmful effects.
- Work together with your teen to set expectations and rules about substance misuse before your teen is exposed to a situation potentially involving substances.
- Ensure your teen is aware of the consequences of breaking the rules as well.
- Spend time with your teen doing activities you both enjoy.
- Be aware of who your teen is with, what they are doing and where they are.
- Set a curfew.
- Have your teen check in throughout the night.
- Know how your teen is getting home.
- Get to know your teen’s friends and their parents.
• Screen all patients, including pregnant women, for alcohol use and provide recommendations for reducing the risk of alcohol-related health harms. The Canadian Centre for Substance Abuse and the College of Family Physicians of Canada (CFPC) have developed a screening, brief intervention and referral guide at www.sbir-diba.ca.

• For more information on substance use in pregnancy, refer to durham.ca.
What Local and Provincial Governments or Regulators Can Do

• Local governments can create a Municipal Alcohol Policy (MAP), or strengthen an existing MAP.

• Local governments can control sales and availability of alcohol, by reducing alcohol retail density.

• Local and provincial governments can control pricing which can help to reduce alcohol-related health and social impacts.\textsuperscript{35}

• Local and provincial governments can ensure that the legal drinking age is enforced as an effective way to reduce underage drinking.

• All levels of government can be involved in creating restrictions around advertising of alcohol to youth.

• A comprehensive Provincial Alcohol Strategy can help ensure the health and safety of residents and reduce the health and social costs associated with alcohol.

• Ensure all retail outlets selling alcohol clearly display Sandy’s Law posters, which advise women of reproductive age about the risk and harms associated with drinking alcohol during pregnancy. This is according to recent changes made to Regulation 718 of The Liquor Licence Act.
Conclusion

Alcohol is not a benign substance. The evidence is clear that it can have significant health, social and financial impacts on individuals and communities. Health harms of alcohol are of special concern for women and vulnerable populations such as youth. Stakeholders and community members can work together to reduce alcohol-related harms in Durham Region using many of the strategies listed in this resource. It is imperative to have conversations about alcohol to address its impact and related harms in our community.
References


28. PMO. (2016). Quick Facts: Hazardous and harmful drinking


Appendix A - Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission Code for Broadcast Advertising

The code for broadcast advertising of alcohol beverages says the following:

Commercial messages for alcoholic beverages shall not:

(a) attempt to influence non-drinkers of any age to drink or to purchase alcoholic beverages;

(b) be directed at persons under the legal drinking age, associate any such product with youth or youth symbols, or portray persons under the legal drinking age or persons who could reasonably be mistaken for such persons in a context where any such product is being shown or promoted;

(c) portray the product in the context of, or in relation to, an activity attractive primarily to people under the legal drinking age;

(d) contain an endorsement of the product, personally or by implication, either directly or indirectly, by any person, character or group who is or is likely to be a role model for minors because of a past or present position of public trust, special achievement in any field of endeavor, association with charities and/or advocacy activities benefiting children, reputation or exposure in the mass media;

(e) attempt to establish the product as a status symbol, a necessity for the enjoyment of life or an escape from life’s problems, or attempt to establish that consumption of the product should take precedence over other activities;

(f) imply directly or indirectly that social acceptance, social status, personal success, or business or athletic achievement may be acquired, enhanced or reinforced through consumption of the product;

(g) imply directly or indirectly that the presence or consumption of alcohol is, in any way, essential to the enjoyment of an activity or an event;

(h) portray any such product, or its consumption, in an immoderate way;

(i) exaggerate the importance or effect of any aspect of the product or its packaging;

(j) show or use language that suggests, in any way, product misuse or product dependency, compulsive behavior, urgency of need or urgency of use;

(k) use imperative language to urge people to purchase or consume the product;

(l) introduce the product in such a way or at such a time that it may be associated with the operation of any vehicle or conveyance requiring skill;

(m) introduce the product in such a way or at such a time as may associate the product with any activity requiring a significant degree of skill, care or mental alertness or involving an obvious element of danger;

(n) contain inducements to prefer an alcoholic beverage because of its higher alcohol content;

(o) refer to the feeling and effect caused by alcohol consumption or show or convey the impression, by behavior or comportment, that the people depicted in the message are under the influence of alcohol;

(p) portray persons with any such product in situations in which the consumption of alcohol is prohibited; or

(q) contain scenes in which any such product is consumed, or that give the impression, visually or in sound, that it is being or has been consumed.

Source: Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission.
