

### **THE CHALLENGE**

Alcohol is such an accepted part of our culture and society that it can sometimes be difficult to imagine just how harmful it can be.

According to the Alcohol Indicators Report, many of the people who experience the consequences of alcohol use are normally healthy young men and women who put themselves in harm's way because of the way they drink.

One especially harmful drinking behaviour is heavy drinking, which is consuming five or more drinks on one occasion. The greatest risks for occasional heavy drinking are related to impaired judgement and thoughtless behaviour, leading to such harms as fatal motor vehicle crashes, falls and other injuries, violence, offences such as public intoxication, and problems with social and family life.

Regular heavy drinking can lead to the added burden of liver disease, heart problems, some cancers, and other serious health and social problems.

### **THE INFORMATION**

74 - 81 percent of Nova Scotians are current drinkers, and for most, alcohol use does not pose a threat to their health and well-being.

Adults aged 25-29 have the highest current drinking rates (91 percent).

One in five current drinkers or approximately 117,114 Nova Scotians are high-risk drinkers – meaning their consumption impacts negatively on their own health and well being, as well as that of their families and communities.

Three to six percent of Nova Scotians drink heavily weekly, and 20 percent drink heavily monthly.

Underage drinkers, young adults aged 19-24, men, and those who have never married are more likely to be heavy and/or high-risk drinkers.

Almost 48,000 Nova Scotians experience harm from their own use of alcohol. These harms impact most on physical health, friendships, and social life. Men and those who drink heavily are much more likely to report harms from their own use of alcohol.

About 237,270 Nova Scotians experience harm from someone else's use of alcohol. Being insulted or humiliated, being verbally abused, and being involved in a serious argument with a drinker are among the most commonly reported harms.

Harmful alcohol use figures significantly in injury, risky sexual behaviour, chronic disease (e.g. heart, liver disease, some cancers), crime, violence, and other social problems.

Each year in Nova Scotia, an average of 600 hospital admissions can be attributed to alcohol.

Annually, about 230 deaths can be attributed to alcohol. Liver disease (30 percent), injuries (33 percent) and alcohol-related cancers (20 percent) account for the majority of these deaths.

The annual health, social, and economic costs of harmful alcohol use to Nova Scotians is \$240 million.

## **THE ACTION**

Addressing high-risk drinking is a priority at Nova Scotia Health Promotion and there is \$285,100 committed in this year's budget. A staff person was hired in April 2005 to lead this work.

This report is a first step in developing a strategy to address high-risk drinking, on which work is currently under way. Nova Scotia Health Promotion is working with partners to identify best practices for reducing harms and consequences associated with alcohol.

Nova Scotia Health Promotion is increasing resources in Addiction Services with new funding for staffing - five new positions will be created in January 2006 at the regional level to address alcohol-related harms.

Nova Scotia Health Promotion will be creating and sharing new information aimed at raising awareness about how to minimize the risks associated with alcohol use.

Nova Scotia Health Promotion has been working with the Department of Education and in January will be field-testing "A Question of Influence," a curriculum supplement for Grades 7-9. It includes components to prevent and delay alcohol use among youth, and to reduce harms and consequences associated with alcohol use.