



RESPONSIBLE HOLIDAY DRINKING

The Issue

Toasting friends with a glass of cheer over the holidays is a tradition for many Canadians. But drinking or serving too much can lead to health and other problems.

Background

Alcohol is a drug, a depressant that slows down your body's central nervous system. Depending on how much you drink, alcohol affects your concentration, speech, balance, vision, coordination and judgement. During the stress of the holiday season, the effects of alcohol can be heightened.

How much alcohol you can drink before feeling the effects depends on many factors:

- How much you usually drink
- How quickly you drink
- Your mood
- Your body size
- The amount you have eaten
- Your past experiences with drinking.
- Your sex

Canada's Drug Strategy considers moderate alcohol consumption for most adults to be no more than one drink a day and no more than seven drinks a week. Having more than four drinks on any one occasion or more than 14 drinks in a week is considered a risk to health and safety.

Short Term Effects of Too Much Alcohol

If you have too much to drink on any occasion, you can expect to experience the following:

- Drowsiness
- Dizziness
- Loss of coordination skills
- Inability to think and judge clearly
- Inability to estimate distances and increased reaction times

Long Term Effects of Too Much Alcohol

You may be drinking too much on a long term basis if you have any of these symptoms.

- The need to drink more to feel the same 'high'
- More money is being spent on alcohol
- Poor appetite, jumpiness, insomnia or sweating when not drinking
- Blackouts when drinking or not remembering drinking
- Bouts of confusion or memory loss

The Health Risks of Too Much Alcohol

Long term heavy drinking can cause many health problems such as:

- Liver damage
- Heart disease
- Stomach ulcers
- Blood vessel disorders
- Impotence in men



- Menstrual irregularities in women
- Some types of cancer

Drinking even a moderate amount when pregnant may damage the fetus, causing a range of health problems called Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder. Recent studies have suggested that drinking even very small amounts of alcohol during pregnancy can have a negative impact on the developing brain. The bottom line is that during pregnancy, or if you are thinking of becoming pregnant, there is no safe time or amount to drink.

Of the estimated 3,000 deaths per year from motor vehicle crashes, approximately 40 per cent are attributed to alcohol. Heavy drinking can also lead to serious professional, family, financial and legal problems, any of which can affect your health.

Minimizing Your Risk

- Limit your consumption of alcohol. Space your drinks at least an hour apart.
- Eat something before drinking. Eating after you've started to drink doesn't help.
- Try alternating alcoholic and non-alcoholic drinks throughout the party to cut down on the amount you drink.
- Drink only if you want to. Don't be pressured into accepting a drink.
- Don't drive. Take a taxi, public transportation, walk or decide who is to be designated driver before the party starts.

As a host, you can protect yourself and your guests by following these tips.

- Limit how much you drink yourself, so you can keep control of things.
- Before the party, ask someone to help you if problems arise.
- Provide alcohol-free drinks such as coffee, tea, pop, fruit punch and juice, along with the alcoholic drinks.
- Mix and serve drinks yourself or appoint someone responsible as bartender. Guests tend to drink more when they serve themselves.
- Serve food, but avoid salty, sweet or greasy foods because they make people more thirsty.
- Stop serving alcohol at least an hour before the party ends.
- Don't rely on coffee to sober guests up. It only makes them more alert, not sober.
- Encourage guests to name designated drivers, leave their cars at home, take taxis or public transport, or walk. Keep cash and taxi numbers at the ready.
- Be prepared for overnight guests by having blankets, sleeping bags and pillows on hand.
- Never serve alcohol to minors.

Health Canada's Role

Health Canada manages Canada's Drug Strategy, which includes alcohol. The Strategy has six objectives:

- Provide national leadership
- Regulate access to controlled substances and prevent the diversion of these substances for illegal purposes

- Manage programs that reduce and prevent the harm associated with controlled substances
- Provide Canadians with information so they can make knowledgeable health and life-style decisions
- Partner with provinces/territories to facilitate access to treatment and rehabilitation services
- Deliver drug analysis services and materials to support the criminal justice system.

Need More Info?

For more information on alcohol-related matters:

- Health Canada - Alcohol and Drug Abuse
http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/english/lifestyles/alcohol_drug.html
- The Canadian Health Network
www.canadian-health-network.ca
- Canadian Liver Foundation - Alcohol and the Liver
<http://www.liver.ca/english/yourliver/alcohol.html>
- Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse
<http://www.ccsa.ca/index.asp?menu=Topics&ID=3>
- Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (search for alcohol)
<http://www.camh.net/index.html>

For additional articles, go to the It's Your Health Web site at:
<http://www.healthcanada.ca/iyh>

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