

Using alcohol and other drugs can impair your judgment, your vision, and your general physical coordination, so it is not surprising to learn that people who use substances are more likely to get hurt than people who don't.

Injury as a result of using alcohol and other drugs can happen to those who use occasionally, even if they are not dependent on substances. The consequences can be long-term and serious.

Substance abuse increases your chance of injury

There are two ways in which people who have taken alcohol or other drugs are at greater risk for injury than other people are. First, they are more likely to get injured. Second, in the same circumstances, an intoxicated person is likely to be hurt more seriously than they would have been if they were not intoxicated.

Substance abuse makes diagnosis difficult

Once an intoxicated person has been injured, there may be further difficulties. Doctors may have trouble diagnosing their injuries. The slurred speech or poor memory that result from drinking too much may look like symptoms of serious head injury. On the other hand, the doctor may smell alcohol on a patient's breath, and think that the alcohol is causing (for example) a patient's loss of balance, and miss an actual head injury.

Repeated injury can be a sign of substance abuse

Not everyone who abuses alcohol or other drugs gets injured, but for some people repeated injuries are one of the signs that they have a problem with alcohol or other drugs. Sometimes family, friends, the family doctor or emergency department staff will notice that there is a relationship between a person's injuries and their use of alcohol or other drugs. This may give them the motivation to ask the injured person about their use, and to encourage that person to get help.

Violent injury and substance use

Violence is the type of injury in which alcohol is most likely to play a role. In one Canadian study of an emergency department, 42% of those with violent injuries had a blood alcohol level (BAL) over 0.08% (the level at which you are legally deemed to be an impaired driver in Canada).

People are more likely to intentionally hurt others, or to have violence inflicted on them, if they have been drinking. Alcohol interferes with brain function, making people less likely to think of consequences. Some people become more aggressive when they drink. Others are more likely to place themselves in risky situations, and become victims of violence.

Accidental injury/death and substance use

Motor vehicle crashes, snowmobile accidents, fire injuries, and falls all frequently involve alcohol or other drug use. Studies have found:

- in Alberta, 21% of drivers involved in fatal collisions had consumed alcohol before the crash.
- among 727 people who died in fires, the average blood alcohol level was 0.19%
- people injured in falls were 60 times more likely to have a blood alcohol content over 0.1%

Brain injury and substance use

Studies have found that between 35 and 50% of those who arrive at emergency rooms with traumatic brain injuries have a history of abusing alcohol or other drugs. Those who are at highest risk for brain injury are also those most likely to abuse alcohol and other drugs: young unmarried men. People who use substances after a brain injury may not have as quick or complete a recovery as they would have if they abstained.