



Mental Health
Commission
of Canada

Commission de
la santé mentale
du Canada



Canadian Centre
on Substance Use
and Addiction

Centre canadien sur
les dépendances et
l'usage de substances



Alcohol Use and Suicide

A Guide to Awareness and Prevention



Suicide is a major public health issue in Canada, affecting individuals, families, and communities. Understanding the factors that contribute to suicide risk is crucial for prevention. Suicide is often the result of a complex interplay of various factors, including mental health disorders, history of trauma or abuse, chronic illness or pain, social factors, and personal stressors (e.g., significant loss, major life changes, identity struggles). Another significant factor is alcohol use, which can influence mental health and suicidal behaviour.¹

Alcohol, which affects the functioning of the brain, is used by about three-quarters of people living in Canada. Alcohol is often used in connection with social events or to mark special occasions. However, alcohol use is responsible for a range of serious health conditions² and it plays a significant role in affecting risk for suicide.

One in four deaths by suicide involve alcohol, either as a means of suicide or detectable in a person's body at the time of death.³





How does alcohol use increase risk of suicide?

Alcohol is a depressant. However, it can have both stimulating and sedating effects. The effects can vary from person to person and depend on how much alcohol is consumed. Stimulating effects may include impulsivity and aggression, while sedating effects may include feelings of sadness and despair.⁴ Alcohol can reduce a person's awareness of their negative emotions and impair their ability to use healthy coping skills to manage stressful situations.⁵ Both effects harm someone experiencing suicidal thoughts by reducing their inhibition and increasing the risk that they will move from suicidal ideation to an attempt.⁶

Research shows that frequency of use and the amount of alcohol consumed can affect the transition from suicidal thoughts, to attempts, to death by suicide.⁷



Alcohol use disorder, acute use of alcohol, and binge drinking are among many intersecting factors that affect suicide risk:

Alcohol use disorder:

This is a medical condition characterized by continued alcohol use despite negative impacts in many domains of a person's life including their physical and mental health.⁸ Alcohol use disorder can affect a person's relationships, increase their social isolation, and trigger psychosocial stressors such as financial insecurity and homelessness. Alcohol use disorder often co-occurs with major depression, further increasing the risk of suicide.⁹

Acute use of alcohol:

This is consumption that occurs about three to six hours before an injury (accident, suicide attempt, etc.) that causes weakened consciousness in a person.¹⁰ Weakened consciousness from alcohol consumption may increase suicide risk by impairing judgment, reducing inhibition, and intensifying feelings of hopelessness or despair.

Binge drinking:

Binge drinking is consuming five or more standard drinks per occasion (for men), or four or more standard drinks per occasion (for women).¹¹ Binge drinking may increase the risk that a person with thoughts of suicide will transition to a suicide attempt by reducing their fear and inhibition, impairing their judgment, and increasing their impulsivity.

*Alcohol use disorder is the **second-most common** mental health disorder in people who have died by suicide.¹²*

Continuum of risk

According to [Canada's Guidance on Alcohol and Health](#), there is a [continuum of risk](#) associated with weekly alcohol consumption where the risk of harm from alcohol is:



moderate for those who consume **between three and six standard drinks** per week,

increasingly high for those who consume **seven standard drinks or more** per week.



low for individuals who consume **two standard drinks or less** per week,



Consuming more than two standard drinks per drinking occasion is associated with an increased risk of harm to self and others, including injuries and violence.

In Canada, a **standard drink is 17 millilitres or 13.5 grams of pure alcohol**, which is the equivalent of:



a bottle of beer

(12 oz., 341 ml, 5% alcohol)



a glass of wine

(5 oz., 142 ml, 12% alcohol)



a bottle of cider or pre-mixed cocktail

(12 oz., 341 ml, 5% alcohol)



a shot glass of spirits

(1.5 oz., 43 ml, 40% alcohol)

Being mindful of these risks and accessing appropriate support can make a significant difference in preventing alcohol-related harm.



Ways to reduce risk

Reflect on the risk associated with alcohol use and consider how it may affect you.

Be aware of your own limits and monitor your alcohol intake. If you consume alcohol, have a substantial meal beforehand, drink slowly, and drink water before, during, and after. **Remember: Any reduction in alcohol use has benefits.**

Consider your emotional state before you drink alcohol. When drinking alcohol, reflect on how you're feeling and the thoughts you are having. Are you currently working through early-life trauma? Have you recently experienced a stressful life event? If so, consider postponing alcohol consumption or closely monitoring your intake. **Seeking mental health support can provide valuable guidance and coping strategies during a challenging time.**

Consider your social network and their drinking habits. Whether spending time with friends, family, or colleagues, be aware of how others' drinking habits may affect your own. If you know you'll be attending an event that involves heavy drinking, consider creating a plan on ways to moderate your own intake. **Tell someone you trust (a friend or family member) about the limit that you would like to set for yourself and encourage them to check in with you throughout the event.**



Find alternatives to drinking alcohol. Think about your reasons for drinking. **If you're looking to spend quality time with a friend or family member, you might be able to achieve the same goal by meeting for a coffee or tea or going for a walk. If you'd like to de-stress, consider going for a run or a long walk.**

Seek learning opportunities about the impact of alcohol use and suicide on individuals, families, and communities. **Helpful information is available from reputable sources like government websites, health organizations, community programs, and educational workshops. See the resources at the end to get started.**

Talk openly with friends and family about alcohol use and suicide. **If you suspect that you may have a challenge with your alcohol consumption, speak to family, friends, and a qualified health-care provider. If you know someone who may be at risk of an alcohol use disorder, consider encouraging them to seek help.**

Help to reduce stigma by knowing the facts about the impacts of alcohol on suicidal thoughts, behaviours, and death by suicide. **Provide information to others and choose non-stigmatizing language.**



Where to seek help

If you or someone you know is in crisis—experiencing immediate danger or intense, recurring suicidal thoughts—seek help as soon as possible.

- **Call or text [9-8-8](tel:9-8-8) | Suicide Crisis Helpline.**
- **Call 9-1-1 for immediate medical support or go to your nearest emergency department.**



If you or someone you know may be struggling with suicidal thoughts or an alcohol use disorder, early intervention can make a crucial difference.

- Talk to a health-care or social service professional at:
 - your family doctor's office
 - [a community health centre](#)
 - [a local community services centre \(CLSC in Quebec\)](#)
 - a neighbourhood walk-in clinic.

Other resources:

- [Preventing Suicide: When and How to Help](#) | Health Canada.
- [Suicide Prevention Toolkits](#) | Mental Health Commission of Canada.
- [Knowing Your Limits with Alcohol: A Practical Guide to Assessing Your Drinking](#) | Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction.
- [Substance Use Disorder and Suicide \(toolkit\)](#) | Centre for Suicide Prevention.
- [Suicide](#) | Centre for Addiction and Mental Health.
- [Canada's Guidance on Alcohol and Health](#) | Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction.
- [SMART Recovery](#).
- [Alcoholics Anonymous](#).

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