



Alcohol

What Is It?

Alcohol is a depressant drug produced by fermenting or distilling fruits, vegetables or grains. Alcohol sold for drinking is **ethyl alcohol**. Other types of alcohol like isopropyl alcohol (used in hand sanitizers, cleaning products) and methyl alcohol (used in industrial solvents, antifreeze, camping stoves) are **not** safe to consume and can be life-threatening.

What Does It Look Like?

Pure (ethyl) alcohol is a clear, colourless liquid. Alcoholic beverages get their colours from the ingredients and fermentation.

How Does It Work?

Alcohol is a depressant – it slows down brain functions and can affect your thinking, attention, judgement, and reaction time. Alcohol also activates the pleasure or reward centres in the brain – this can make people feel:

- a sense of wellbeing
- relaxed
- disinhibited (having less control over your actions, especially inappropriate actions)
- euphoric (intense feeling of excitement or happiness)

Why Is It Dangerous?

Alcohol can have widespread effects on a person's life including physical, mental, and social harms.

Even a small amount of alcohol can be harmful to your health. The more alcohol you drink, the more the consequences add up.

Short-term alcohol use can cause:

- impulsive behaviour
- impaired attention, concentration and judgement
- drowsiness
- aggressiveness and violent behaviour
- slowed reaction time
- slurred speech
- double or blurred vision
- flushed skin
- nausea and vomiting
- frequent urination
- impaired memory or loss of memory
- increased risk of injury and sexual violence



Drinking any amount of alcohol while pregnant can also cause serious harms to your baby, such as **Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD)**, birth defects, miscarriage, and stillbirth.

Heavy, long-term drinking can have many negative health outcomes such as organ damage (especially the liver, brain, heart, and stomach), increased risk of cancer, less ability to fight infections, and mental illness.

Long-term alcohol use can be very hard to stop. Withdrawal symptoms include:

- Tremors or shaky hands
- Headaches
- Nausea and vomiting
- Fever, aches, and pains
- Overall feeling of “unwell”
- Strong cravings for alcohol
- Increased or irregular heart rate
- Insomnia or nightmares
- Seizures
- Hallucination

If a person tries to stop drinking alcohol suddenly, they may become very sick or die from the withdrawal. **Avoid quitting “cold turkey” – talk to a health care provider about it first.**

What Does Alcohol Toxicity Look Like?

Severe alcohol intoxication can lead to alcohol toxicity (overdose/poisoning). Signs and symptoms include:

- Blue, cold, clammy skin
- Vomiting
- Not moving, not waking up
- Slowed or no breathing
- Loss of bladder and bowel control

Alcohol toxicity is a medical emergency. Do not let someone “sleep it off.” **Call 9-1-1 immediately**, and place them in the **recovery position**.

Safer Use Tips

If you are using alcohol, here are some tips to decrease your risk:

- **Drinking less is better.** If you’re going to drink, try not to exceed 2 drinks on any day – see Canada’s Guidance on Alcohol and Health.
- Avoid drinking multiple days in a row, and take breaks whenever possible.
- Have alcohol-free weeks or do alcohol-free activities.
- If you regularly drink heavily, seek medical support to quit or cut down safely.
- **Don’t drink and drive!**
- **Drink lots of water.** If you are drinking alcohol, try to alternate alcoholic drinks with water to stay hydrated.



- Eat before and while you are drinking.
- **Set a limit and stay within it.**
- **Watch your drinks.** Don't accept drinks from strangers and avoid leaving your drink unattended. If you think your drink has been spiked, go to your nearest health centre and tell them what you are experiencing.
- **Never mix alcohol with other drugs.**
- **Be aware of sexual violence.** Only a sober 'yes' means yes – consent must be given freely and consistently. If you feel unsafe or are about to blackout, find a safe place immediately.

Need Help?

Reach out to your local health centre, community counsellor/mental health professional, or call 8-1-1.