

# Alcohol Use and Older Adults in Canada

As you age, your body stores more fat and less muscle and water, leading to slower alcohol metabolism and increased sensitivity to its effects.

## Index

- [Impact of alcohol use on older adults](#)
- [Low-risk drinking guidance](#)
- [Older adults typically consume less alcohol](#)
- [Factors contributing to alcohol use in older people](#)
- [Alcohol commonly accompanies or exacerbates mental health issues](#)
- [Treatments and Counseling](#)
- [Related Links and Infographics](#)

## Impact of Alcohol Use on Older Adults

As you age, your body stores more fat and less muscle and water, leading to slower alcohol metabolism and increased sensitivity to its effects.

The amount of alcohol in an older adult's blood after one drink is higher than that of a younger adult.

Older adults who continue the same drinking pattern into their senior years may be unaware that they have less tolerance than when they were younger.

Age-related changes may increase sensitivity to alcohol, leading to dizziness and falls.

## Low Risk Drinking Guidance

In 2023, the Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction (CCSA) released updated guidance on low-risk drinking for Canadians, taking into account new evidence on cancer and cardiovascular disease risks.

The updated guidance redefines the category of low-risk drinking to be 2 standard drinks or less per week with no more than 1 standard drink per instance.

### Alcohol Consumption Risk Levels

Significantly increased risk of heart disease or stroke

Increased risk of certain cancers

Unlikely to experience alcohol-related consequences

Benefits include improved health and sleep



There is a continuum of risk associated with weekly alcohol use where the risk of harm is:

**0 drinks per week** - Abstaining from drinking alcohol has numerous benefits, including improved health and better sleep.

**2 standard drinks or less per week** - At this level, you are unlikely to experience any alcohol-related consequences.

**3-6 standard drinks per week** - Your risk of developing several types of cancer, such as breast and colon cancer, increases at this level.

**7 standard drinks or more per week** - At this level, your risk of heart disease or stroke increases significantly.

Each additional standard drink radically increases the risk of alcohol-related consequences.

The guidelines advise that people should reduce their alcohol consumption or abstain entirely if they are taking medications or have health issues.

## **Older Adults typically consume less alcohol.**

As people get older, they continue to drink alcohol, but they tend to consume less of it.

Studies show a significant drop in heavy drinking rates for adults over 65, from over 20% in the 54 to 64 age range to just over 10% for those over 65 years old.

This trend continues with a drop to 7% for the over 75 age range.

## **Factors contributing to alcohol use in older people:**

- Grief due to the loss of a spouse, adult children moving away, etc.
- Boredom due to retirement and loss of roles

- Chronic pain
- Depression
- Insomnia
- Loneliness and isolation: It is difficult to leave the house to attend treatment or participate in non-drinking activities
- Shame, especially among women, which may make them reluctant to disclose their drinking and seek help

## **Alcohol commonly accompanies or exacerbates mental health issues.**

Older Adults who experience depression are 3-4 times more likely to develop alcohol-related problems.

Psychosocial factors such as boredom, loneliness, and homelessness are linked to higher alcohol use.

There are some particular risk factors for older adults to watch for; these include depression, recent loss of loved ones, isolation, and chronic painful illnesses.

Depression is both a precursor and a consequence of heavy drinking.

## **Treatments and Counseling**

Some older adults are unable to access or do not feel comfortable in mainstream addiction services.

The older generation is more likely to experience self-stigmatization, which reduces the chance of seeking treatment and services.

The end goal of abstinence is not necessary or realistic for many older adults with alcohol use problems. Instead, a harm reduction goal that is related to quality of life improvement as defined by the older person is the aim.

Treatment/counseling should focus on what can make life better, more comfortable, and happier, not only on alcohol use.

**Sources:**

Canada's Guidance on Alcohol and Health

<https://www.ccsa.ca/canadas-guidance-alcohol-and-health>

Using substances as an older adult

<https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/health-promotion/aging-seniors/using-substances-older-adult.html>

Aging and substance use: Understand your risks

<https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/publications/healthy-living/aging-substance-use-understand-risks.html>

Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction Clinical Guidelines

<https://ccsmh.ca/areas-of-focus/alcohol-use/clinical-guidelines>

You should not rely on information tools for medical, financial or legal advice. It provides general information only. NICE is not responsible for any use of the information other than for general educational/informational purposes and no claim can be made against NICE or any of its personnel for any such use.

**Last Updated:** April 24, 2026

