

# Balancing our Thinking around Drinking: Low-Risk Alcohol Use on Campus

## Helping campuses promote the safer use of alcohol and other drugs.

This is one in a series of resources meant to guide the development of specific tools to promote elements of a comprehensive approach to psychoactive substance use within a post-secondary institution's community.

Consuming alcohol is a popular pastime in post-secondary settings, as it is in society in general. Alcohol often helps people relax, socialize and celebrate. But drinking also carries some risk and can at times result in harm. With this understanding, Canada has adopted low-risk drinking guidelines (LRDG) that both respect personal choice and attempt to mitigate health and safety concerns. People who choose to follow them can enjoy the benefits of drinking while minimizing potential for problems. Such guidelines can be used as a health literacy tool, advice to encourage people to reflect on their own drinking patterns and become more intentional in their use of alcohol.

The more people on campus who adopt low-risk drinking practices, the healthier and safer the learning environment can be. But getting buy-in from the campus community at large requires more than messaging around how to regulate personal use. It involves a combination of interconnected environmental and individual-focused initiatives that address various factors of influence on drinking. Guidance on lowering risk in use of alcohol can be a useful component in health promotion within a more comprehensive campus health strategy.

Perhaps the best way to promote the guidelines is within a larger package of communications around promoting health and minimizing harm. They may be offered as one modern day expression of what has been observed over the course of human history—that alcohol use can be a positive, enjoyable, rewarding experience, rather than have unwelcome (and perhaps even very damaging) consequences. That global perspective and message can summed up as **not too much, not too often, and only in safe contexts**.

This resource offers a means for reflecting on and building content for communication around low-risk drinking. It also provides suggestions on how that messaging can be conveyed to promote healthier relationships with alcohol on campus, and refers to support tools available for use, if desired.

## Ancient Wisdom on Drinking

What insights gained across the ages can we draw on in our time? Alcohol has been used in various human societies for at least 9,000 years and has served a wide variety of purposes. Communities have used it in celebrations and ceremonies. And individuals have used it (with differing degrees of success or failure) to enhance their mood, relax, overcome social inhibitions, foster fun times with friends, relieve physical pain and cope with personal disappointments.

Guidelines to help drinkers balance benefits with a consideration of potential harms are not new. Plato, in his dialogue on *Laws*, suggested that only those over 18 should consume alcohol and then only in moderation, until they reached a mature age when drinking a bit more might enhance enjoyment of the occasion. Eubulus, a 4<sup>th</sup> century BCE playwright, artfully described the contrast in effects between modest and excessive intake:

*Three bowls only do I serve for the temperate: one for health, which they empty first; the second for love and pleasure; and the third for sleep. When*

## Points to Consider When Promoting Low-Risk Drinking Guidelines

Promotion of current Canadian guidelines can reinforce the persuasions of those already inclined to drink in a moderate manner. However, bald presentation of the recommendations themselves may not appeal very much to those who presently indulge at higher levels of intake, since the guidelines do not speak to many **expectancies, motivations and perceived benefits** that prompt use, nor do they refer to a full range of strategies people may employ to reduce risk. It is also important when designing promotion strategies to be aware of the natural resistance that often occurs in response to advice that is viewed as too directive or too conservative.



*this bowl is drunk up, wise guests go home. The fourth bowl is ours no longer, but belongs to violence; the fifth to uproar; the sixth to drunken revel; the seventh to black eyes; the eighth is the policeman's; the ninth belongs to biliousness; and the tenth to madness and hurling the furniture.*

In our culture, many post-secondary students have adopted moderate, responsible patterns of use. But the stereotype of the “binge” drinking college student is still well entrenched. And some do drink heavily rather often. Efforts to enhance health literacy around alcohol, including learning from the past, seem fitting for the academic setting—for all members of the campus community.

# Messaging Related to Low-Risk Drinking Guidelines

Besides drawing on recent scientific research, Canada's low-risk drinking guidelines reflect wisdom accumulated across the ages:



NOT TOO MUCH



NOT TOO OFTEN



ONLY IN SAFE CONTEXTS



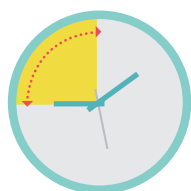
## Not too much

Young adults under 25 are advised per drinking occasion to limit themselves to:



**2 drinks  
for women**

**3 drinks  
for men**



**no more than  
2 drinks over a  
3-hour period**

This pattern helps to reduce the risk of intoxication and related harms, such as injuries from falling, fighting and other “not good” things that tend to happen when people drink too much and too quickly. The “buzz” gets lost fairly soon with fast, heavy drinking, meaning increased quantity does not spell enhanced quality. In short, “less can be more” when it comes to booze and fun.

## Not too often

**The guidelines suggest young women have no more than 10 drinks on a weekly basis, and young men have no more than 15, with some days in the week being 100% alcohol-free.**

Following this pattern lowers the risk of cancer and other diseases and conditions that can arise from habitual use of alcohol (including relying on alcohol as a “friend” during the highs and lows of life instead of just an “acquaintance” for fun times with friends and family).

## Only in safe contexts

Certain conditions in themselves are risk-reducing, including being in the company of trustworthy friends while drinking and taking the time to plan how much is reasonable to drink and how to get home safely. It also means going to safe, well-managed venues that make it easy to have a good time without overdoing it or running into other problems. Some situations in life call for keen mental alertness or full physical capacity, making them bad times to choose to drink alcohol. These include driving or operating other equipment, playing sports and making important life decisions.

Some settings are riskier than others too, making limited or no drinking the best options. These include parties or gatherings where there is a lot of alcohol and seemingly no rules—no one is monitoring drinking levels, people are playing drinking games, there are more strangers than friends around, or initiation events are unsupervised. In these circumstances in particular, it makes the most sense to drink only a little, if at all.



## 2-3-4-0

For those who like numbers, the guidelines can be captured as 2-3-4-0.



2

**Women** who want to drink with reduced risk of eventual health problems should have no more than **2 drinks a day** or **10 drinks a week**.



3

**Men** who want to drink with reduced risk of eventual health problems should have no more than **3 drinks a day** or **15 drinks a week**.

**Women** who wish to avoid potential adverse consequences from intoxication should have no more than **3 drinks on a single occasion**.



4

**Men** who wish to avoid potential adverse consequences from intoxication should have no more than **4 drinks on a single occasion**.

0

To avoid any kind of habituation or dependency, it is recommended that everyone—men and women—choose **not to drink at all at least one or two days a week**.

It is inappropriate to drink alcohol under certain circumstances, such as:

- When you have important decisions to make
- When you are engaged in a dangerous physical activity
- When you are operating a motor vehicle, machinery, or mechanical or electrical equipment
- When you are responsible for the safety of others
- When you take medication that is affected by alcohol
- When you have certain mental or physical health problems
- When you have a problem with alcohol dependence

The safest option during pregnancy or when planning to become pregnant is to not drink alcohol at all. While the risks of light drinking during pregnancy are considered minimal, no safe limit has been established. Nursing mothers should not drink before nursing.

### In Canada a standard drink amounts to:



an ordinary can or bottle of regular beer (341 ml/12 oz. at 5% alcohol)



a small glass of wine (142 ml/5 oz. at 12% alcohol)



a shot of spirits in a regular cocktail or highball (43 ml/1.5 oz. at 40% alcohol)

There are different ways to visually reference a “standard drink.” See the following for ideas.

- [www.ccsa.ca/Resource%20Library/2012-Canada-Low-Risk-Alcohol-Drinking-Guidelines-Brochure-en.pdf](http://www.ccsa.ca/Resource%20Library/2012-Canada-Low-Risk-Alcohol-Drinking-Guidelines-Brochure-en.pdf)
- [www.heretohelp.bc.ca/sites/default/files/LRDG\\_StandardDrink.pdf](http://www.heretohelp.bc.ca/sites/default/files/LRDG_StandardDrink.pdf)
- [www.deflatetheelephant.ca/homebartending\\_challenge/index.html](http://www.deflatetheelephant.ca/homebartending_challenge/index.html)

# Using Low-Risk Drinking Guidelines on Campus



Low-risk drinking messaging can be offered in various campus settings and through a variety of vehicles. But choosing what to say and how to say it takes a little time and consideration. It is important to ask if the communication is merely information or prescription. Or does it aim to engage people, prompt them to reflect on their choices, encourage dialogue about alcohol, and strengthen intent? With this kept in mind, low-risk drinking guidelines can be publicized in many ways:

- Displayed in campus health-related web pages and printed materials
  - » E.g., infographics, brochures/pamphlets, cards, posters, coasters, magnets, bookmarks, t-shirts, mugs, etc., variously disseminated on campus (e.g., in student service centre reception areas, offices, library information racks, kiosks, bookstore counters and shelves, lounge areas, bulletin boards, washrooms, cafeterias, campus pub tables)
- Relayed along with electronic communications
- Displayed on monitors/screens situated throughout the campus
- Placed in student association handbooks and agendas/planners
- Included in student campus media
  - » E.g., newspaper op-eds and ads, radio talk show topics
- Conveyed through social media
- Presented for discussion in first-year or residence orientation sessions or in campus forums
- Included in messaging at student health fairs as part of a package of interactive engaging activities that encourage students to enhance their literacy and manage their health
- Integrated into conversations that take place with students in formal clinical encounters at counselling and health services, at events sponsored by wellness centres, and in meetings students have with faculty members, athletics staff, residence advisors, or peer mentors

# A Closing Consideration

Messaging efforts around low-risk drinking that are attention grabbing, respectfully appealing and positively provocative might have a modest impact on a number of individuals. But even this minimal gain can be compromised if those efforts to reduce drinking harms are not situated within a consistent, multifaceted strategy aimed at promoting a positive campus culture. This would involve attention to developing a broad campus community consensus around mutual responsibility for healthy attitudes and behaviours related to alcohol. Mixed or conflicting messages (e.g., service practices on campus that encourage or allow excessive drinking, or tolerance of practices that compromise regard for self and others) will undermine any messaging around moderation.



## Available Tools and Samples to Support Implementation

### Promoting Low-Risk Alcohol Drinking

- [www.ccsa.ca/Eng/topics/alcohol/drinking-guidelines/Pages/default.aspx](http://www.ccsa.ca/Eng/topics/alcohol/drinking-guidelines/Pages/default.aspx)

### Low-Risk Drinking Guidelines

- [www.heretohelp.bc.ca/sites/default/files/drinking-guidelines-supporting-health-and-life.pdf](http://www.heretohelp.bc.ca/sites/default/files/drinking-guidelines-supporting-health-and-life.pdf)

### Alcohol Reality Check

- <http://www.alcoholreality.ca>

### Éduc'alcool's Moderation by the Numbers: 2-3-4-0

- <http://educalcoool.qc.ca/en/alcohol-and-you/health/moderation-by-the-numbers-2-3-4-0/#.VnH2fE1IjIU>
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kOiAQkiWZbk>
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XtH8OjXEY6Q>

### Keep it Social

- [www.KeepItSocial.ca](http://www.KeepItSocial.ca)

### Understanding Canada's Low-Risk Alcohol Drinking Guidelines (video)

- [www.youtube.com/watch?v=NbpdMFEE-AIE](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NbpdMFEE-AIE)

## Published 2016

Healthy Minds | Healthy Campuses is a cross-province Community of Practice managed and coordinated by the Canadian Mental Health Association BC Division on behalf of the BC Partners for Mental Health and Addictions Information. The lead partners for Healthy Minds | Healthy Campuses are the Canadian Mental Health Association BC Division and the Centre for Addictions Research of BC. The BC Partners are funded by BC Mental Health and Substance Use Services, an agency of the Provincial Health Services Authority. The Healthy Minds | Healthy Campuses' Changing the Culture of Substance Use project is funded by the BC Ministry of Health.



**Canadian Mental  
Health Association**  
British Columbia  
*Mental health for all*



**University  
of Victoria**

**Centre for Addictions  
Research of BC**