



Youth and Alcohol

The Low-Risk Alcohol Drinking Guidelines (LRDGs) are based on research and were created to provide Canadians with recommendations for alcohol consumption that could limit their health and safety risks. Some might suggest that since people younger than 19 (or 18 in Alberta, Manitoba and Quebec) cannot legally buy alcohol, the only guideline for them should be, “Don’t drink.”

The reality is that many youth do drink alcohol. There is evidence that drinking alcohol can harm physical and mental development, particularly in adolescence and early adulthood, although certain patterns of use are riskier than others. For this reason, the LRDGs recommend that youth delay drinking alcohol for as long as possible, at least until the legal drinking age. If youth do decide to drink, they should follow the more specific drinking guidelines provided below.

What Are the Low-Risk Alcohol Drinking Guidelines for Youth?

Canada’s LRDGs recommend that youth up to the legal drinking age:

- Speak to their parents about drinking;
- Never have more than one to two drinks per occasion; and
- Never drink more than one or two times per week.

- 70% of Canadian youths reported drinking alcohol in 2012
- Canadian youth first consume alcohol at an average age of 16 years old

Canada’s LRDGs recommend that from the legal drinking age to 24 years:

- Females never have more than two drinks a day and never more than 10 drinks a week
- Males never have more than three drinks a day and never more than 15 drinks a week

The maximums for youth above the legal drinking age differ from the general LRDGs as these limits apply even on special occasions.

The Reason for Drinking Guidelines for Youth

Just like the body, the human brain is still developing throughout adolescence and early adulthood, until about 24 years of age. The frontal lobe is the last part of the brain to mature and is involved in planning, strategizing, organizing, impulse control, concentration and attention. Drinking alcohol while these





changes are occurring can have negative effects on the brain's development. In addition to this risk, puberty causes neurochemical and hormonal changes that make adolescents more likely to engage in risky behaviour and seek thrilling experiences. Starting to drink at the time when strategy and planning skills are still underdeveloped and the desire for thrills is high can have harmful effects on a youth's health and safety.



Other Harms that Can Occur When Youths Consume Alcohol

Youth might not be familiar with the effects of alcohol, putting them at risk for dangers such as injury and alcohol poisoning. Most young people do not drink in moderation on a regular basis, but rather alternate between periods of abstinence and binge drinking.

Drinking alcohol can lead youth to make bad decisions, such as driving after drinking or getting into a car with a driver who has been drinking. Drinking is also related to increased chances of suicide, homicide, drowning and experiencing or committing physical or sexual assault because alcohol impairs judgment, reasoning and the ability to evaluate risk.

Recent trends suggest that some youth are combining alcohol with other drugs or caffeinated energy drinks. These substances can interact to increase risky behaviours and can cause dangerous and unpredictable effects in the body, including alcohol poisoning, drug overdose and death.

Additionally, like adults, youths who regularly consume alcohol above the low-risk drinking guidelines increase their risk of developing chronic illnesses such as cancer, stroke, heart and liver disease.

Up to 30% of students report consuming five or more drinks on one occasion.

Youth Should Delay Drinking

There is no age at which it is considered “normal” for youth to start drinking, although the legal age to buy alcohol – a law intended to support the idea of postponed drinking – varies from 18 to 19, depending on the province. Often, the earlier an adolescent starts to drink, the more frequently he or she drinks, and the more likely he or she is to develop alcohol dependence or have future problems with alcohol. The LRDGs recommend youths delay starting to drink alcohol for as long as possible.



The Role Parents Can Play

Parents can play a large role in youths' attitudes towards alcohol by speaking to their children about the effects and risks of drinking, and by ensuring youths are educated so they can make more responsible decisions. Providing clear expectations about a youth's drinking and the reasons behind these messages can influence his or her choices. As well, the direction and modelling of moderate alcohol consumption by parents can result in lower rates of alcohol-related problems among children.

Some parents might choose to introduce their children to alcohol, and research shows that the outcome of this decision depends on the context in which it occurs. For example, parents in some cultures think it acceptable to offer their child a little wine at family dinners on special occasions, and in cultures where this is the practice the rates of alcohol-related problems are sometimes lower. However, problems with alcohol can develop when parents provide alcohol to youth without guidance or supervision. For this reason, if youth should start drinking – and it is recommended that they do not – it would be better for them to drink small amounts of alcohol in the company of their parents, if the parents demonstrate low-risk drinking.

- Alcohol is related to 50% of motor vehicle accidents in which a youth is killed
- 31% of alcohol-related traffic deaths in 2009 were youths

Take Home Message

To be low risk, youths must keep within the single-day and weekly limits for their gender, but they also need to remember that drinking within the LRDGs does not mean there is no risk to drinking.

Guidelines for specific illnesses will depend on each person's risk for those conditions. It is impossible to provide guidelines for every disease and circumstance. However, young people who are concerned about alcohol-related conditions should drink less than the maximum limits recommended in the guidelines for youth.

Youths can consult their healthcare providers to understand the impact of their drinking habits. Not drinking alcohol might be the healthiest choice.

Additional Resources

- [Canada's Low-Risk Alcohol Drinking Guidelines](#)
- [Canadian Alcohol and Drug Use Monitoring Survey, 2012](#)
- [Centre for Addictions Research of British Columbia](#)
- [Cross-Canada Report on Alcohol and Drug Use](#)
- [Éduc'alcool: The Effects Of Early Alcohol Use](#)
- [MADD Canada: Youth Services – Statistics & Links](#)
- [National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism: Underage Drinking](#)
- [Parent Action on Drugs](#)
- [Royal Canadian Mounted Police](#)
- [Women and Alcohol \(LRDG Summary\)](#)
- [Cancer and Alcohol \(LRDG Summary\)](#)



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