

GENERAL FACTS ABOUT ALCOHOL USE: PREVENTING PROBLEMATIC DRINKING

APRIL 2022

SPOTLIGHT FACTSHEET

WHAT ADULTS NEED TO KNOW

INCREASED ALCOHOL CONSUMPTION LEADS TO INCREASED RISK

Alcohol is one of the most commonly used and misused substances in the U.S. Most adults report using alcohol at some point in their lifetime. We can protect ourselves and neighbors by supporting policies that promote alcohol safety such as limiting where and when alcohol is sold, enforcing underage drinking laws, and increasing access to treatment and recovery services.

In New Hampshire (NH) and across the country, recent data show adults are consuming more alcohol since the pandemic. Data kept by the New Hampshire Liquor Commission show an increase in sales which could be an indication of increased consumption. According to these data, alcohol sales increased about 5.2% in 2020 compared to 2019 with increases seen in the sale of imported, craft and hard seltzer beers.²

Several national surveys echo this trend. One survey found off-premises and online alcohol sales increased 55% and 26.2% as compared to the same time in the previous year.³ In a Dartmouth-Hitchcock study, looking at the impact of the pandemic on substance use, providers observed a 77% increase in alcohol consumption in April 2020 and an 84% increase four months later in their patients.⁴ Another national survey conducted by the RAND Corporation found that the overall frequency of alcohol consumption increased by 14% among

adults over age 30, compared to the year prior. This survey also found women have increased their heavy drinking episodes (four or more drinks within a couple of hours) by 41%.⁵ Women have shouldered the brunt of the pandemic with limited childcare options, disrupted school schedules and remote work.

HOW ALCOHOL CAN HARM YOU AND OTHERS

Although short-term and occasional alcohol use can make a person feel happy, relaxed, and sociable; excessive or chronic, long-term drinking can lead to physical, mental and emotional problems and even alcohol dependence. Chronic alcohol use is also associated with other cognitive and mental health issues. It can impact learning or memory and exacerbate or cause serious mental health issues like depression and anxiety. Evidence suggests that even drinking within low-risk limits may increase a person's overall risk of death from various causes, such as from several types of cancer and certain forms of cardiovascular disease.⁶

Drinking excessively within a short period of time, or binge drinking, increases the stress on your body and internal organs. High levels of alcohol in your body can result in headaches, severe dehydration, nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, and indigestion.⁷ Binge drinking is a pattern of abusing alcohol that results in a person's blood alcohol concentration (BAC) reaching up to .08 (80mg%). This level usually happens after four (4) standard drinks for women, or five (5) for men, in about two hours. Your BAC can be

WARNING SIGNS THAT YOUR DRINKING IS HARMFUL

Everyone is different but in general when alcohol misuse begins to negatively impact a person's life and cause harm, it is diagnosed as an alcohol use disorder. Recognizing the warning signs can make a significant difference in someone's recovery process. Some of the most common symptoms of alcohol misuse are:

- Experiencing temporary blackouts or short-term memory loss
- Exhibiting signs of irritability and extreme mood swings
- Making excuses for drinking such as to relax, deal with stress or feel normal
- Choosing drinking over other responsibilities and obligations
- Becoming isolated and distant from friends and family members
- Drinking alone or in secrecy
- Feeling hungover when not drinking
- Changing appearance and group of acquaintances you hang out with¹³



higher than this, depending on your weight and the amount of time you spend drinking.⁸

The people most directly impacted by the excessive use of alcohol are partners and spouses, children and family members; however, adults with children have reported increasing their alcohol consumption during the COVID-19 pandemic.⁹ But other people are indirectly impacted too with car crashes related to impaired drivers, harassment, feeling threatened or afraid, vandalized property, and increased assaults and violence.

ALCOHOL AND PREGNANCY DON'T MIX

Any type of alcohol use at any point during pregnancy can affect a baby's growth and development and may cause fetal alcohol spectrum disorders (FASDs).¹⁰ FASDs are permanent impacts on the brain and body of individuals prenatally exposed to alcohol during pregnancy resulting in a spectrum of physical, emotional, behavioral and neurological characteristics.¹¹ Not drinking alcohol is the safest option when pregnant and breastfeeding. Generally, moderate alcohol consumption by a breastfeeding mother (up to one standard drink per day) is not known to be harmful to the infant, especially if the mother waits at least two hours after a single drink before nursing. However, exposure to alcohol above moderate levels through breast milk could be damaging to an infant's development, growth, and sleep patterns. Excessive drinking could also impact a parent's judgment and ability to safely care for their child.¹²

HOW MUCH IS TOO MUCH?

A standard drink is defined as 12 ounces of beer, 5 ounces of wine, or 1.5 ounces of 80-proof liquor. If you are consuming a mixed drink or full glass of wine, that is most likely more than one drink.

STRATEGIES FOR DRINKING LESS

Once you've assessed the impact of drinking on your health, use the following tips to make a positive change.

- **Identify good reasons to cut down:** Make a list of the reasons to cut back on your drinking — such as feeling healthier, sleeping better, or improving your relationships.
- **Explore how making a change might impact your life for the better:** What might happen if you continue to drink at risky levels? How will things be different if you cut back or stop?
- **Identify situations where you might drink too much and plan for them:** Do you drink when

you are bored? What else could you do? Come up with alternatives for yourself.¹⁵

- **Keep track of how much you drink:** Have a plan when you drink like no more than one drink per hour.
- **Keep a diary of your drinking.** Keep track of every time you have a drink for a couple of weeks. Include information about when, where and why you drank. Compare this to your goal.
- **Drink slowly.** Sip your drink. Drink soda, water, or juice after having an alcoholic beverage. Never drink on an empty stomach – this means definitely eat that extra piece of pizza (or two) before a night out!
- **Hydrate with water.** Drink a glass of water between every alcoholic drink.
- **Ask for support.** Cutting down on your drinking may not always be easy. Let friends and family members know that you need their support. Your doctor, counselor, or therapist may also be able to help.¹⁶

THE GUIDELINES ON LOW-RISK DRINKING:

Low risk drinking for healthy men up to age 65

No more than:

2 drinks/day



4 drinks at any one time



14 drinks/week



Low risk drinking for healthy women*

No more than:

1 drink/day



3 drinks at any one time



7 drinks/week



*(and healthy men over age 65)

- ✓ **MEN over 65:** No more than one (1) drink on any day and no more than seven (7) drinks per week, or are unable to control the amount they drink.¹⁴

The guidelines also do not recommend that individuals who do not drink alcohol start drinking for any reason and that if adults of legal drinking age choose to drink alcoholic beverages, drinking less is better for health than drinking more. The guidelines note that some people should not drink alcohol at all, if they are:

- pregnant or might be pregnant.
- under the legal age for drinking.
- taking certain medications that can interact with alcohol or have certain medical conditions.
- recovering from an alcohol use disorder

RESOURCES AND SUPPORT

If you are concerned about your substance use or that of a loved one, seek help. Sudden withdrawal from heavy drinking can cause dangerous side effects such as seizures. The [Doorway](#) can connect you or a loved one to the care that's right for you anywhere in New Hampshire.

Partnership to End Addiction

<https://drugfree.org/prevention-and-taking-action-early/>: Science and research-based information to help parents protect their child's well-being and recognize substance use early in their children.

Today is For Me

<https://todayisfor.me/>: Whether you're just living healthy, planning to become pregnant, pregnant, or breastfeeding, we have research-based resources on alcohol and marijuana use during pregnancy to support you.

Binge Free 603

<https://bingefree603.org/>: What's Your Reason: Health campaign where young adults in NH share their reasons for not overdoing it with alcohol. What's your reason?

Rethinking Drinking

<https://www.rethinkingdrinking.niaaa.nih.gov/how-much-is-too-much/>: Curious if you drink too much? Want to learn about the safe limits of alcohol use and recognize when it is a problem? Find tips and strategies for making a change with your drinking and ways to reduce your risks.

- 1 <https://americanaddictioncenters.org/alcoholism-treatment/body-effects>
- 2 Supporting Healthy Lives During the COVID-19 Pandemic: Alcohol Consumption Brief, Feb 2021
- 3 Supporting Healthy Lives During the COVID-19 Pandemic: Alcohol Consumption Brief, Feb 2021
- 4 Supporting Healthy Lives During the COVID-19 Pandemic: Alcohol Consumption Brief, Feb 2021
- 5 Pollard MS, Tucker JS, Green HD Jr. Changes in Adult Alcohol Use and Consequences During the COVID-19 Pandemic in the US. JAMA Network Open. 2020 Sep 1;3(9):e2022942. doi: 10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2020.22942. PMID: 32990735; PMCID: PMC7525354.
- 6 <https://www.cdc.gov/alcohol/faqs.htm>
- 7 <https://www.cdc.gov/alcohol/faqs.htm>
- 8 <https://www.cdc.gov/alcohol/faqs.htm>
- 9 Barbosa C, Cowell AJ, Dowd WN. Alcohol Consumption in Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic in the United States. J Addict Med. 2020 Oct 23. doi: 10.1097/ADM.0000000000000767. Epub ahead of print. PMID: 33105169.
- 10 <https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/fasd/faqs.html>
- 11 <http://www.fasdnetwork.org/what-is-fasd.html>
- 12 <https://www.cdc.gov/breastfeeding/breastfeeding-special-circumstances/vaccinations-medications-drugs/alcohol.html>
- 13 <https://www.alcoholrehabguide.org/alcohol/warning-signs/>
- 14 U.S. Department of Agriculture and U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. 2020 - 2025 Dietary Guidelines for Americans. 9th Edition, Washington, DC; 2020.
- 15 <https://www.councilsepa.org/programs/screening-brief-intervention-and-referral-to-treatment-sbirt/what-is-low-risk-drinking/%23-:text=No%20more%20than%204%20drinks,ounces%20of%2080-proof%20liquor.>
- 16 <https://bingefree603.org/take-a-break-nh/>



Extension



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© 2021 The Partnership @drugfreeNH. All rights reserved. This factsheet is sponsored by the NH Department of Health and Human Services, the NH Governor's Commission on Alcohol and other Drugs, the New Hampshire Charitable Foundation, and is partially supported by the FY2020 Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration Rural Opioid Technical Assistance Grant # 1H79TI083274-01. It is managed by JSI Research & Training Institute, Inc. The contents of this factsheet may not represent the views or policies of our funders.

