

THE BASICS

Alcohol

Do you know?

- Ethyl alcohol (ethanol) is the type of alcohol found in alcoholic drinks. It is a depressant (a drug that slows down your brain functioning). It is produced when fruits, vegetables and grains ferment, or it can be man-made.
- Another kind of alcohol is called methyl alcohol (methanol). It is found in some household and industrial products, such as hairspray and antifreeze, and is poisonous to drink.
- A standard drink is considered to be one 355 ml bottle of beer, which has the same amount of alcohol as one 150 ml glass of wine or approximately 40 ml of spirits, such as whiskey, vodka, rum or scotch.
- The more alcohol in the body, the more intoxicated (drunk) a person is, and the longer it takes for the alcohol to leave the body.
- It takes about one to two hours for an adult liver to break down the alcohol in one standard drink. If a person drinks more than this, the alcohol builds up in the body. For example, if you have two drinks in one hour, it could take the body up to four hours to get rid of all the alcohol. That is why drivers should not drink at all.
- In Manitoba, it is legal for people age 18 and over to consume alcoholic beverages.

A Danger for Regular Drinkers

Regular users of alcohol may not seem drunk, but they are still not safe when doing things that need judgment, such as driving.

Short-term Effects

While using alcohol a person may:

- feel more relaxed and sociable
- feel drowsy, dizzy and flushed
- do things they would not normally do
- make poor decisions
- have trouble walking or moving
- have slurred speech and blurred vision
- have lowered blood pressure, breathing, pulse
- show aggressive or violent behaviour
- not be able to remember what they did or said (called a blackout)
- pass out (become unconscious), reflecting a degree of coma

Long-term Effects

After heavy use over a long period of time, a person may experience:

- skin problems and stomach ulcers
- vitamin deficiencies
- sexual problems, such as decreased sperm production, impotency (the inability to have sexual intercourse) and infertility (the inability to have children)
- mood changes and emotional changes
- brain damage and memory loss
- liver damage, heart and circulatory problems, and many types of cancer

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Tolerance and Dependence

- Drinkers can become psychologically dependent (they feel they need it) as well as physically dependent (the body needs it) on alcohol.
- Tolerance (a need for more alcohol to get the desired effect) builds up the more a person drinks.

Withdrawal Symptoms

Withdrawal symptoms range in severity:

- Less severe symptoms include hangovers, which are common. Hangovers often include headaches, shakiness, sensitivity to light and sound, nausea and vomiting.
- More severe withdrawal symptoms can occur after long periods of regular, heavy drinking. They include aches, pains, increased blood pressure, rapid pulse and breathing, nausea, vomiting, panic, seizures, hearing and seeing things that aren't there, depression and even death.
- Professional supervised care is recommended for dependent drinkers.
 - If severe withdrawal symptoms are being experienced, consult a medical professional immediately.

Other Risks

- When mixed with drugs, alcohol can be dangerous. Talk to your doctor or pharmacist about drinking alcohol while taking medication.
- Drinking a lot of alcohol very quickly is called *chugging* and is usually done in drinking games. Drinking a lot of alcohol is called *binge drinking*. (For example, five or more drinks for men and four or more drinks for women).
 - Both chugging and binge drinking can cause alcohol poisoning, which is an overdose of alcohol that results in vomiting, passing out and sometimes death.
- People can put themselves in risky situations when drinking (driving while impaired, having unprotected sex, taking unsafe actions which could cause injury).

- People can become ill if they mistake methyl alcohol, which is poisonous, for ethyl alcohol. Always ensure that all types of alcohol are properly labeled and stored in their original containers.
- Alcohol use during pregnancy can cause permanent damage to the developing baby. There is no safe amount of alcohol that can be consumed during pregnancy.
- Alcohol and other drugs used by a nursing mother can pass from her bloodstream through breast milk to the nursing baby. Alcohol use may: slightly reduce milk production and impair milk release; affect baby's sleep patterns; influence gross motor development and early learning.

REMEMBER: A person's experience with any drug can vary. Here are a few of the many things that may affect the experience: the amount and strength of the drug taken, the setting, a person's mood and expectations before taking the drug, gender, overall health, past experience with that drug and whether more than one drug is being used at the same time. Using alcohol and other drugs at the same time can be dangerous.

Sources and For More Information

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Mayo Clinic F.A.Q. 2002.

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National Institute on Drug Abuse Website: www.nida.nih.gov

Straight Facts about Drugs and Drug Abuse, Health Canada, 2000.

Street Drugs: A Drug Identification Guide, Publishers Group, LLC, Plymouth, MN, 2005.

For more information or for help with a drug or alcohol problem: Contact your local Addictions Foundation of Manitoba (AFM) office or visit the website at www.afm.mb.ca. AFM offers a broad range of prevention and rehabilitation services, including harm reduction and abstinence-based programs for alcohol, other drugs and gambling.

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