

Tips for...

Cutting Back or Quitting Drinking Alcohol

Many people who drink alcohol moderately put themselves and others at risk for alcohol-related harms. Moderate drinkers may believe that because they are not “alcoholics” (people who are dependent on alcohol) they can drink freely without worrying about the consequences. They may also believe that only heavy drinkers cause accidents or bar brawls, but the truth is that moderate drinkers cause as much damage as heavy drinkers.

Many moderate drinkers—particularly those who sometimes drink to the point of intoxication—walk a fine line between living normal, productive lives and living recklessly, wearing down the faith and patience of family, friends and co-workers. Try the Alcohol Reality Check, available at www.alcoholreality.ca to measure your drinking pattern.

You are placing yourself, and possibly others, at risk of harm if you

- occasionally or regularly drink too much (more than four drinks per occasion for men, or more than three drinks for women),
- occasionally drink in situations where no, or less, alcohol is best (e.g. before driving, in other situations where alertness is required, when using medications, etc.), or

- find yourself, from one week to the next, in a pattern of drinking heavier amounts (more than 20 drinks a week for men, or more than 10 drinks for women).



Most moderate drinkers could benefit from cutting back on their alcohol intake. Some people would be wise to consider quitting drinking altogether. Some find it easy to do this; for others it is not so easy. People who drink heavily may experience withdrawal symptoms when they try to stop. Withdrawal symptoms for alcohol may include tremulousness (“the shakes”), irritability, nausea and vomiting, and difficulty sleeping. Symptoms normally reach peak intensity within 24 to 48 hours, and subside in two or three days. After ceasing heavy drinking, people may experience convulsions (seizures) which can occur between five and 20 days later. Delirium tremens (DTs) occur four or five days after prolonged, heavy drinking stops. Because withdrawal can be potentially life-threatening, it is important to consult a physician or other health care professional before suddenly stopping heavy use of alcohol.

If you think it's time to cut down or quit drinking but don't know where to start, consider these six steps to changing your current alcohol-use patterns.



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1. Consider your current patterns of use

Think about how much and how often you drink in a day, week or month. This will help you clearly understand your alcohol-use patterns and assist you in monitoring your progress as you cut down or quit. If you're not sure about your current use patterns, try keeping track in a daily diary for a week or so. Or create a chart, such as the one below. If you're worried about someone discovering your alcohol use, fill in your diary or chart with code words that nobody but you can understand.

2. Think about why you drink alcohol

If you're using alcohol regularly, there are probably reasons why. Is it because it helps you to relax? Does it help you to forget about pressures in your life? Does it help you sleep? Make a list of the things you like about alcohol, or the things you look forward to when you think about using it.

Your list might look something like this

- I like drinking alcohol because*
- *it makes me become more assertive,*
 - *it makes me feel more relaxed and social,*
 - *I can forget my problems for a while, and*
 - *I like the taste.*

3. Make a list of reasons why you want to cut down or quit drinking alcohol

Now that you know what you like most about drinking, consider the benefits of cutting down or being completely alcohol-free. Is it affecting your health? Is it affecting your family and friends? Are you concerned about how much it is costing you? Have you hurt yourself when under the influence?

Create a list of reasons to change your current pattern of use. Here's an example:

- I want to cut down on (or quit) drinking because*
- *I spend too much money on alcohol,*
 - *I sometimes do embarrassing things when I drink too much,*

Weekly Chart

Current Use	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday
WHEN? WHAT SITUATION?							
# OF STANDARD DRINKS*							
USE WITH OTHER SUBSTANCES **							
DIFFICULT TO STOP ONCE STARTED? (YES/NO)							
OTHER FACTORS							
OK OR TOO MUCH?							

***Standard Drink:** A standard drink amounts to one 350 ml (12 oz) bottle of beer (5% alcohol); one 150 ml (5 oz) glass of table wine (12% alcohol); one 45 ml (1.5 oz) standard cocktail (40% alcohol); or one 90 ml (3 oz) serving of fortified wine such as sherry or port (18% alcohol).

** Including medications such as tranquilizers, sleeping pills, pain killers, and some herbal medicines.

- these days I seem to get angry when I drink, and
- I've missed work because of hangovers.

4. Be aware and prepare

It's important to know that change can sometimes be difficult to create and sustain. Some people can do it on their own, and others need help from friends, family or professionals. If your desire for alcohol is strong, if you have difficulty stopping after two or three drinks, or if you continue to use alcohol even though it's causing problems, your drinking may have evolved into alcohol dependency. Alcohol dependency is a serious condition involving physical, emotional, cognitive and spiritual elements. Some people are able to recover from alcohol dependency on their own. However, many people have better results with counselling or treatment.

You can prepare for making the change you want with some planning. Jot down some things you think could be difficult. Also, think about different ways to support the changes you want to make. You can start by creating a chart that lists Potential Difficulties on one side, and Resources for Support on the other.

5. Make a step-by-step plan to make change happen

Set a goal that makes sense to you. Your goal could involve reducing the amount you drink per occasion, or drinking no alcohol in higher-risk situations (e.g., before driving or other activities where alertness is required). It may involve avoiding intoxication or reducing the total amount you drink in a typical week. Or it may be a combination of these. You may even choose to quit drinking altogether. Whether you just want to cut down, or you have decided to quit completely, it is time to turn that decision into a series of practical steps. First, decide which day you're going to begin making the change. Then, write down a detailed account of what the change will actually look like and think about the things you will do on those first few days of change. Next, outline how you'll deal with any withdrawal symptoms or cravings you may get. Finally, think about alternative ways

My plan for cutting back on drinking alcohol

1. As of May 1, I'm going to stop drinking after work and only drink on Friday nights.

On the first night of change, I will go for a long walk after work. The next night I will go to a movie with a friend who doesn't drink.

2. Some things I can do to help me cope with cravings:

- *talk to a trusted friend, family member or counsellor*
- *go for a walk, bike ride, or get some other form of exercise*
- *clean, or do something that makes me feel productive*

3. Some things I can do to help myself achieve a healthy balance:

- *engage in meaningful social activities where I don't feel like using alcohol, or using more alcohol than I want to*
- *build healthy relationships in which my desired level of alcohol use is respected*
- *see a counsellor or find alternative ways to deal with difficult emotions*

4. Review my progress in 3 months.

Low-risk Drinking Guidelines for BC:

Recommended maximum, any one day:

- men: four standard drinks (no more than two in the first hour, one per hour afterwards)
- women: three standard drinks (no more than two in the first hour, one per hour afterwards)

Recommended maximum, any week:

- men: 20 or fewer drinks
- women: 10 or fewer drinks

Build non-drinking days into the week, especially if you are drinking to the maximum amount for any one day.

to achieve the benefits you got from your previous pattern of alcohol use and how to make a healthy transition. Plan to achieve goals in each of the major areas of your life: family/home, physical, emotional/learning, social/community, activity/occupational, spiritual/ethical. Reaching these goals is a matter of making it happen, rather than just wishing it would. See the Problem Substance Use Workbook on the Here to Help website if you want more help or information.

On page three is a sample plan for someone who's been drinking alcohol daily and wants to cut back.

6. Stay positive and stay active

It took time for you to develop your current alcohol-use pattern, and it may take some time to develop and adjust to new habits. Stay committed to your decision to cut down on or quit using alcohol. If you go off your plan one day, don't be too hard on yourself. Think about why it happened, and plan for how you'll handle the same situation if it happens again. Give yourself credit for any positive changes you make, even tiny ones. Fill your time with meaningful activities. Try a new hobby that you have always wanted to try. Keep your eyes on your future as you put your plan into practice.

What to do if you or someone you know is experiencing a problem with alcohol

For information on treatment options and resources, call:

Alcohol and Drug Information and Referral Service

1-800-663-1441 (throughout BC)

604-660-9382 (in Greater Vancouver)

For more information about alcohol and other substances, visit www.heretohelp.bc.ca or www.carbc.ca.

Quick tips for cutting down on your drinking:

- Drink slowly and avoid pressure from others to pick up the pace.
- Set a limit to your drinking time.
- Eat food before and while drinking.
- Avoid salty snacks that increase your thirst.
- Have a glass of water or some other non-alcoholic beverage between alcohol drinks.
- Choose light beer or other low-alcohol drinks.
- Refill your own glasses, keep track of your drinks and avoid topping up your drinks.
- Keep less alcohol at home.
- Track changes in your drinking pattern by keeping a diary, recording how much you drink and noting the circumstances in which you drink (i.e., where, with whom, and for what reason).

Visit the Here to Help website to access the Problem Substance Use Workbook at this address: <http://heretohelp.bc.ca/sites/default/files/images/psuworkbook.pdf>.



heretohelp

The BC Partners for Mental Health and Addictions Information are a group of seven leading provincial mental health and addictions nonprofit agencies. The seven partners are Anxiety BC, BC Schizophrenia Society, Centre for Addictions Research of BC, Canadian Mental Health Association's BC Division, F.O.R.C.E. Society for Kids Mental Health, Jessie's Hope Society, and Mood Disorder's Association of BC. Since 2003, we've been working together to help individuals and families better prevent, recognize and manage mental health and substance use problems. BC Partners work is funded by BC Mental Health and Addiction Services, an agency of the Provincial Health Services Authority. We also receive some additional support from the Ministry of Children and Family Development. The BC Partners are behind the acclaimed HeretoHelp website. Visit us at www.heretohelp.bc.ca. Produced by the Centre for Addictions Research of BC