

# CANADA'S ALCOHOL CHALLENGES



## A widely accepted and consumed substance\*\*

- 75% of Canadians aged 15 and over drink alcohol (76%). The largest proportion of alcohol users is found among 20–24-year-olds (84%).<sup>1</sup>
- Despite the purchase of alcohol being prohibited for people under 19 (18 in Quebec, Manitoba and Alberta), many minors still consume alcohol products. In 2019, almost half (44%) of students in grades 7-12 had consumed alcohol during the year.<sup>2</sup>
- The average age of first use of alcohol is 13 years old.<sup>3</sup>
- Nearly 1 in 5 women report having consumed alcohol during pregnancy.<sup>4</sup>
- 61 % of Canadians believe that regular alcohol consumption is socially acceptable (vs. 90 % for occasional consumption). This makes alcohol the psychoactive substance whose consumption is the most socially accepted.<sup>5</sup>



## Underestimated effects

- While some studies mention certain protective or beneficial effects of alcohol, it is not recommended to consume alcohol for its potential benefits, including on a cardiovascular level<sup>6,7</sup>: it is estimated that about 200 social and health problems are associated with alcohol consumption and any regular consumption of alcohol, even in small amounts, can be harmful to health.<sup>8,9,10</sup>
- Contrary to popular belief, alcohol can have negative effects on physical and mental health and cause short- and long-term harm. It can also exacerbate other psychosocial problems (domestic violence, crimes, pathological gambling, etc.).<sup>11</sup>
  - Alcohol consumption causes certain cancers, digestive diseases such as cirrhosis and ulcers, and certain cardiovascular problems. Intoxication may also lead to injuries due to falls or accidents, and alcohol poisoning can lead to death in certain cases.
  - Alcohol affects the central nervous system, which slows down all body functions.
  - Although its effects may seem calming and uplifting, it can negatively affect mood, impair reasoning, increase anxiety, and cause impulsive or risky behaviours.
  - When consumed during adolescence, alcohol can harm brain development.<sup>12,13</sup>
  - Alcohol may also be associated with suicidal behaviour and thoughts. In Canada, 20 to 30% of suicide deaths also involve alcohol consumption.<sup>14,15,16,17,18,19</sup>
  - There are strong links between alcohol use and the occurrence, frequency, severity, and perception of violence:<sup>20</sup> in Canada, in almost half (43 %) of observed cases of violence and aggression, alcohol consumption by the abuser is involved.<sup>21</sup>
  - Alcohol is toxic for fetuses. Consumed during pregnancy, its effects are unpredictable and irreversible (e.g., miscarriages, fetal alcohol spectrum disorder, etc.).<sup>22</sup>

\* Proportion of people who reported having consumed alcohol during the previous 12 months.

- The annual rate of hospitalizations entirely attributable to alcohol is 258 per 100,000 inhabitants (nearly 18,000 hospitalizations) and has been increasing since 2015.<sup>23</sup>
- More than 1 in 5 alcohol users (21%) experienced at least one alcohol-related harm during the year (unable to stop drinking, failing to do what is expected, needing a first drink in the morning, unable to remember what happened, etc.). This proportion increases among young adults aged 20-24 (40%) and among those aged 15-19 (38%).<sup>24</sup>
- A majority of Canadians (67%) consider the current level of alcohol consumption in society to be problematic (vs. 44% in Quebec).<sup>25</sup>
- On the contrary, according to a 2018 study, most post-secondary students view alcohol consumption as positive and having minimal health and safety risks, despite having had negative experiences.<sup>26</sup>

## Heavy drinking and addiction

- Since 2015, on average, nearly 1 in 5 Canadian alcohol users (16%) aged 12 and over have been reporting heavy alcohol drinking\*\* over the previous year.<sup>27</sup>
- Nearly a quarter of students (23%) in grades 7 to 12 report risky drinking behaviours (5 or more alcoholic drinks on the same occasion).<sup>28</sup>



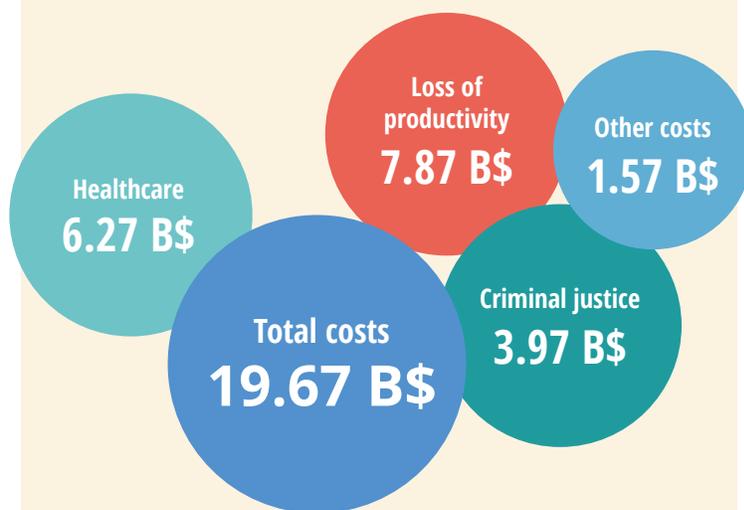
- According to the most recent data, at least 18% of Canadians met the criteria for alcohol abuse or addiction at some point in their lives.<sup>29</sup>

\*\* Heavy drinking is defined as consuming at least 5 drinks of alcohol for men or 4 drinks of alcohol for women, on a single occasion, at least once a month during the year.

## Billions of dollars in social and health costs

Adding together the health, disability, and social costs resulting from alcohol consumption, we estimate the costs and economic impacts of alcohol-related harms in Canada at nearly \$20 billion per year. According to an estimate made in 2020, alcohol is the substance with the greatest financial cost in the country.<sup>30</sup>

### Estimated social and health costs of alcohol use in Canada in 2020



## Marketing increases consumption

- As illustrated in the ASPQ's Portrait of Alcohol Marketing in Quebec<sup>31</sup>, the marketing of the alcohol industry is particularly intensive, and it is so across Canada. The frequent discounts and promotional offers are added to the flamboyant displays, contests, and ubiquitous advertisements online and in public spaces.
- Advertising increases alcohol consumption.<sup>32</sup>
- Facilitating physical and economic access to alcohol contributes to increasing its consumption and therefore its risks and the costs of its harms.<sup>33</sup>
- Restricting the advertising of alcohol is effective in reducing alcohol-related morbidity and mortality.<sup>34</sup>

# Canada's Alcohol Challenges



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