

Even 'low-risk' drinking can be harmful

15 June 2020, by Paul Candon



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It's not just heavy drinking that's a problem—even consuming alcohol within weekly low-risk drinking guidelines can result in hospitalization and death, according to a new study published in the *Journal of Studies on Alcohol and Drugs*.

Moderate drinkers "are not insulated from harm," write researchers led by Adam Sherk, Ph.D., of the Canadian Institute for Substance Use Research at the University of Victoria in British Columbia, Canada.

The Canadian government's low-risk drinking guidelines state that women should consume no more than about 10 drinks per week and men no more than 15. (A drink is 12 oz. of beer, 5 oz. of wine, or 1.5 oz. of liquor.) These limits are slightly higher than those in the United States and exceed those of most other high-income countries.

In their research, Sherk and colleagues found that in British Columbia, a significant portion of alcohol-caused death and disability was experienced by those drinking within these guidelines. For example, more than 50 percent of cancer deaths resulting from alcohol use occurred in people

drinking moderately. Further, 38 percent of all alcohol-attributable deaths were experienced by people drinking below the weekly limits or among former drinkers.

However, for women, [alcohol consumption](#) within the guidelines did offer some protection from death from heart attack, stroke and diabetes. Nonetheless, "[t]his protective effect did not appear to hold for men," the authors write, "who experienced harm at all drinking levels."

DOES DRINKING WITHIN CANADA'S LOW-RISK GUIDELINES PREVENT HARM?

CANADA'S GUIDELINES:

- ♀ **MAX 10 DRINKS/WEEK; 2/DAY**
- ♂ **MAX 15 DRINKS/WEEK; 3/DAY**

Does drinking within Canada's low-risk guidelines prevent harm? Credit: University of Victoria

For their study, the investigators used a new, open-access model—the [International Model of Alcohol Harms and Policies \(InterMAHP\)](#)—which can be used to estimate alcohol harms in a country or state, in total or by drinking group. They used British Columbia-specific [alcohol](#) exposure data from substance use surveys, hospital data from the Canadian Institute for Health Information and mortality data from Statistics Canada's Vital Statistics. These sources were nonidentifying and for 2014.

Because of these results, Sherk and colleagues say that some national drinking guidelines, which are published by many countries to help drinkers

make informed health decisions, may be too high. This may be particularly true in Canada, where the research was conducted.

Sherk suggests that guideline limits should be lowered to match those in the Netherlands: "Don't drink or, if you do, drink no more than one drink per day."

Overall, he says, the best advice for [drinking](#) is to err on the side of caution, "When it comes to [alcohol use](#), less is better."

More information: Sherk, A., Thomas, G., Churchill, S., & Stockwell, T. (2020). Does drinking within low-risk guidelines prevent harm? Implications for high-income countries using the international model of alcohol harms and policies. *Journal of Studies on Alcohol and Drugs*, 81, 352–361. [DOI: 10.15288/jsad.2020.81.352](https://doi.org/10.15288/jsad.2020.81.352)

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