

KNOWING YOUR LIMITS WITH ALCOHOL

A Practical Guide
to Assessing
Your Drinking



Canadian Centre
on Substance Use
and Addiction



Acknowledgements

Knowing Your Limits with Alcohol: A Practical Guide to Assessing Your Drinking was originally developed and distributed by David Brown, PhD, of Pathways Research. CCSA has obtained all rights to the guide and is responsible for the current updated version. Dr. Peter Butt, MD, contributed to the updated version of this guide, which is available free of charge for use by organizations. The guide can only be modified with written copyright permission and acknowledgement. This statement must be included if the workbook is reused in any format.

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THINKING ABOUT DRINKING

Drinking alcohol beyond low-risk levels can seriously affect many different areas of your health and wellbeing, even if you never become addicted to alcohol.

This brief guide is easy to understand and provides a way to assess your own drinking patterns, so you can get a better idea of your risk level.

If you then decide you want to change your alcohol consumption to a lower-risk level, the guide has some steps, tips and a “standard drinks” tracker to help you do that over four weeks.

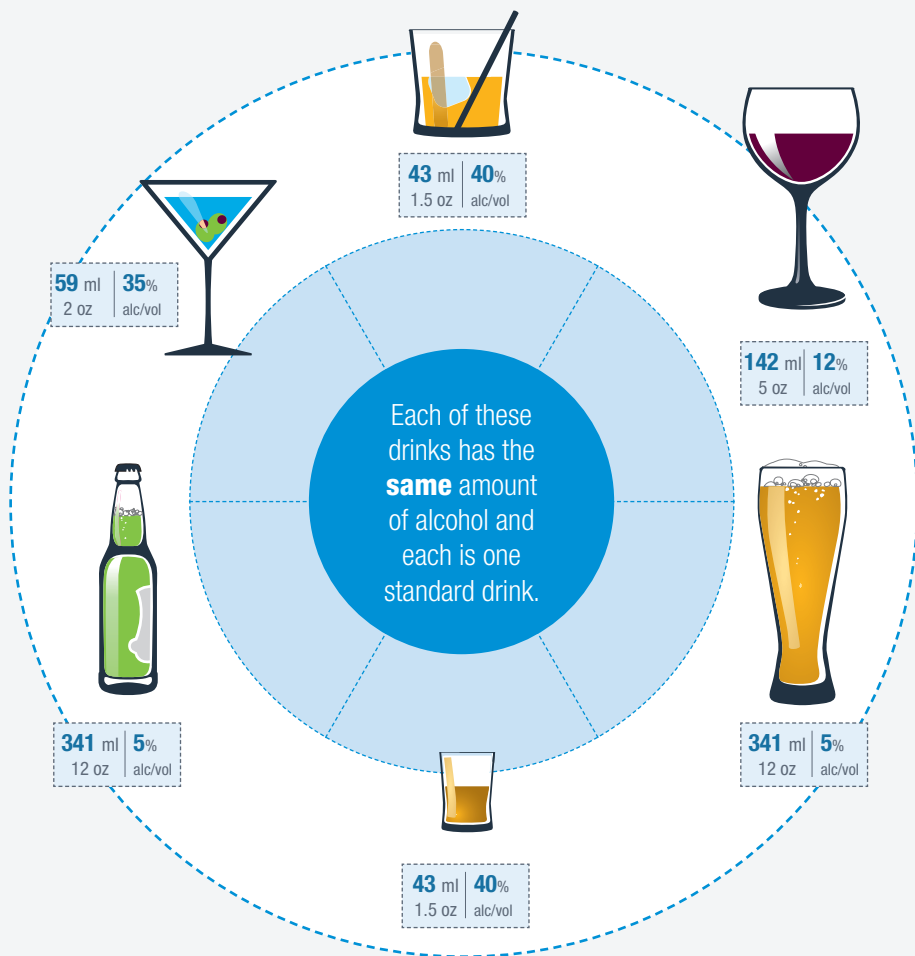
You may find this guide helpful by using it on your own. You can also use it with the guidance of a healthcare professional.

Keep in mind that this guide is only a self-help resource. It is not a tool for identifying medical problems, nor is it intended to replace treatment for medical disorders.

If you ever feel that you need more help than this guide offers, don’t hesitate to reach out for support from your healthcare provider:

Let's count your drinks

It's easy to measure your alcohol use by counting standard drinks. A standard drink has 13.45 grams (g) of alcohol, regardless of the kind of drink you're having. For example, a 142 millilitre (ml) glass of wine and a 341 ml glass of beer both have about 13.45 g of alcohol. So, they're each equal to one standard drink.

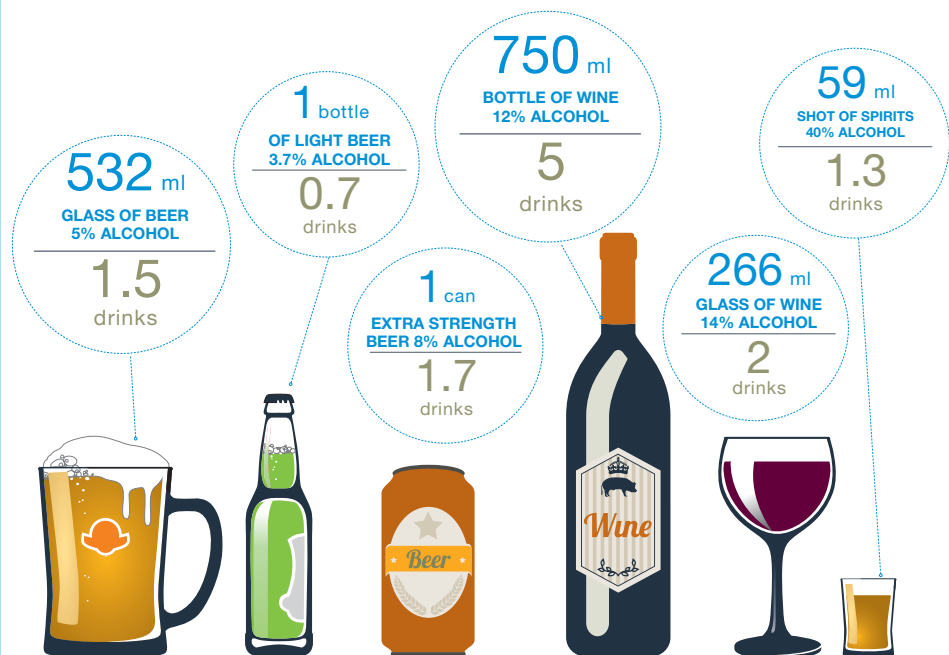


Learning to count drinks

Different sized containers and drinks with different alcohol percentages changes the number of “standard” drinks.

One standard drink is:

341 ml (12 oz)	bottle of 5% beer	about 130 calories
43 ml (1.5 oz)	shot of 40% hard liquor	about 105 calories + mixer
142 ml (5 oz)	glass of 12% wine	about 125 calories



Now let's review your drinking

STEP ONE:

Think about the past year.
How many standard drinks did you usually have each week?

Usual number of
“standard” drinks
each week

Score for males

Score for females

2 or fewer	0	0
3 to 6	0	0
7 to 10	1	2
11 to 15	2	3
16 to 20	3	4
21 or more	4	5

How often have you consumed more than 4 drinks (for adult females)
or 5 drinks (for adult males) on any one occasion?

Score

Zero occasions	0
Less than monthly	1
Monthly	2
Weekly	3
Daily or almost daily	4

Please enter your Step one **total** score here
and again on page 5.

STEP TWO:

Think about the past year.

Which of these things were sometimes true for you?
Please check all that apply.

- ☐ You felt a strong need to drink
- ☐ Your drinking caused problems for you or others
- ☐ Your drinking made it harder to do important things
- ☐ Someone said that you should drink less
- ☐ You found it hard to drink less

To get your Step 2 score, count the number of boxes you checked above. If you checked none of the boxes, then your Step 2 score is zero.

Please enter your Step 2 score here and again below.

Finding your TOTAL SCORE

Please enter your Step 1 score here +

Please enter your Step 2 score here =

Add these two numbers to get
your **TOTAL SCORE**

Making sense of your total score

Your total score will tell you more about your risk for experiencing health and social harms. Remember, *any* reduction in alcohol consumption is beneficial and can lower your risk of harms.

TOTAL SCORE	Risk for health and social harms	Understand your score
0 points	LOW	If your risk level is low , you're less likely to experience health or social problems from your current pattern of alcohol use. This workbook may help you, your family or friends to remain in this low-risk category.
1 to 6 points	MARGINAL	If your risk level is marginal , there's a good chance you will experience some health or social problems soon unless you reduce your alcohol use. This workbook may help you better manage your drinking
7 to 10 points	MEDIUM	If your risk level is medium , you are likely starting to experience some health or social harms from your drinking. There's also a good chance that you will experience more problems soon. This workbook is designed to help you change your drinking pattern to a lower-risk level.
11 to 14 points	HIGH	If your risk level is high , you are likely experiencing fairly severe health or social harms because of your drinking. You are also at risk of developing alcohol use disorder and experiencing more serious health and social harms down the road. Consider connecting with a healthcare provider or substance use treatment professional for advice and support. They will understand and guide you to the help you need, which may include anti-craving medications, detox and counselling. You can still use this workbook to focus on change and stay motivated.

What is risky drinking?

Most of the people with major health risks from their drinking are NOT addicted to alcohol.

Consuming more than 2 standard drinks in a day or drinking occasion can increase the risk of harms to self and others, including injuries, violence and alcohol poisoning. This risk becomes higher after more than 4 drinks (for females) or 5 drinks (for males).

Drinking also starts to become quite risky for onset or worsening of chronic diseases at 7 or more drinks a week. The more you drink, the higher your risk.

Chronic diseases include liver disease, cancer, high blood pressure, heart disease and stroke. Drinking beyond these weekly levels also increases the risk for problems with learning and memory, depression and anxiety, and work and family life.

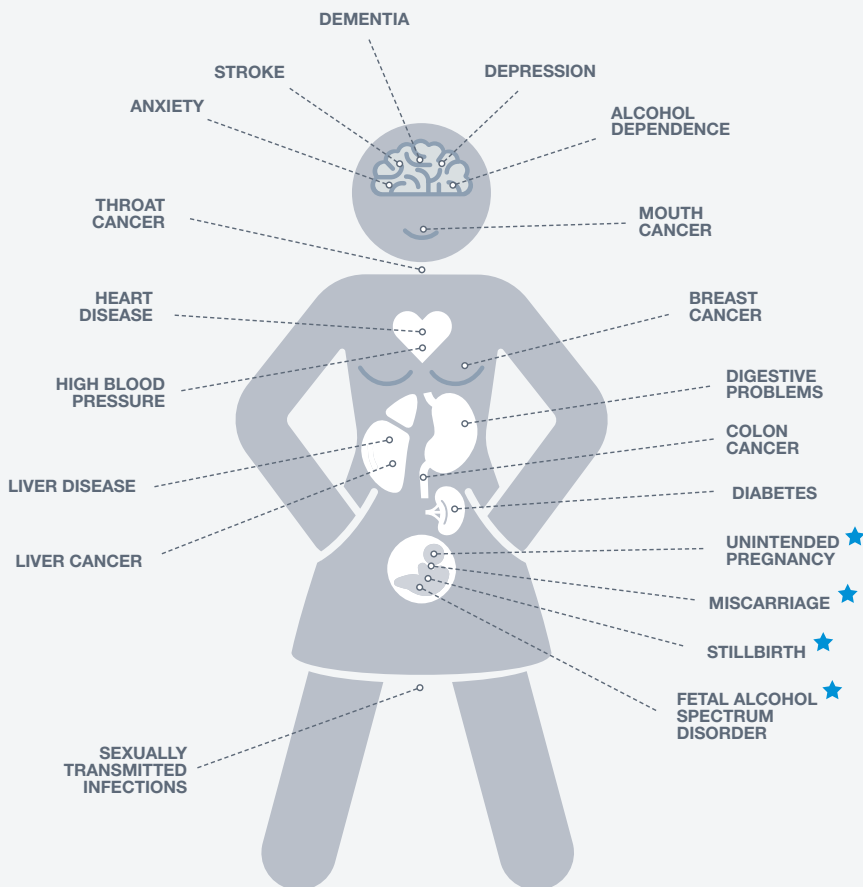
Remember

For someone using cannabis, other drugs or taking medications, alcohol can lead to dangerous reactions or make your medication not work.

For a person who is pregnant, trying to become pregnant or breastfeeding, there is no known safe amount of alcohol use.

For anyone who is in recovery from alcohol use disorder, starting to drink any amount can be dangerous.

Drinking and your health



★ If pregnant or trying to become pregnant.

For more information about alcohol and your health see
*Sex, Gender and Alcohol: What Matters for Women in
Low-Risk Drinking Guidelines? 2022*

and *Lifetime Risk of Alcohol-Attributable Death and Disability, 2023*

Available at www.ccsa.ca.

CANADA'S GUIDANCE ON ALCOHOL AND HEALTH

Canada's [Guidance on Alcohol and Health](#) outlines a continuum of risk associated with weekly alcohol consumption where the risk of harm from alcohol is:

- Low for those who consume between 1 or 2 standard per week;
- Moderate for those who consume between 3 and 6 standard drinks per week; and
- Increasingly high for those who consume 7 standard drinks or more per week.

Consuming more than 2 standard drinks per drinking occasion (per day) is associated with an increased risk of harms to self and others, including injuries and violence.

Any reduction in alcohol per week can be beneficial to overall health.

▶ WHEN ZERO'S THE LIMIT

Do not drink when you are:

- driving a vehicle or using machinery and tools
- Taking medicine or other drugs that interact with alcohol
- Doing any kind of dangerous physical activity
- Living with mental or physical health problems
- Living with an alcohol use disorder
- Pregnant or planning to become pregnant
- Responsible for the safety of others
- Making important decisions

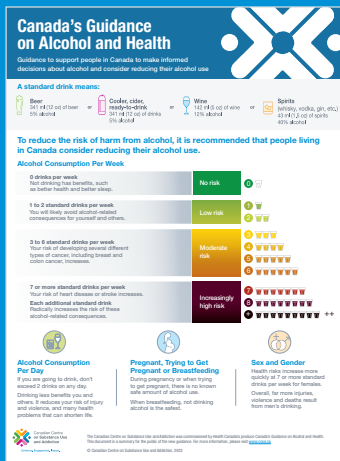
▶ PREGNANT? ZERO IS SAFEST

If you are pregnant, planning to become pregnant or are breastfeeding, the safest choice is to not drink any alcohol at all.

▶ DELAY YOUR DRINKING

Alcohol can harm the way the body and brain develop. It is best to delay drinking for as long as possible. As a harm reduction measure, if youth choose to drink, they should do so under parental guidance; never more than 1 or 2 drinks at a time, and never more than 1 or 2 times per week. They should plan ahead and follow local alcohol laws.

Youth in their late teens to age 24 years should never exceed the daily and weekly limits outlined in the **Guidance**



Let's look at your drinking likes and dislikes

What do you **LIKE** about drinking?

1.

2.

In what ways has drinking been **HELPFUL** for you?

1.

2.

What do you **DISLIKE** about drinking?

1.

2.

In what ways has your drinking been **HARMFUL** or **NOT HELPFUL** for you?

1.

2.

Moving toward change

What are some reasons you want to change your drinking?

- ☐ To avoid hangovers
- ☐ To lose weight
- ☐ To be healthier
- ☐ To avoid injuries
- ☐ To prevent chronic disease
- ☐ To spend less money
- ☐ To have better relationships
- ☐ To do better at work or school
- ☐ Other

What are some challenges to reducing your drinking?

Thinking about change

We've looked at what you like and dislike about drinking.

And we've talked about health and other problems that can arise from drinking beyond a low-risk level.

From your perspective, how **important** is it for you to reduce how much you drink?

0 1 2 3 4 5

Not very important

Very important

How **ready** are you to begin reducing how much you drink?

0 1 2 3 4 5

Not very ready

Very ready

How **confident** are you that you can reduce how much you drink?

0 1 2 3 4 5

Not very confident

Very confident

It's your choice

You have a wide range of options from which to choose.

For example, you could...

Option 1 — Stop drinking altogether

Option 2 — Take a break from drinking for a month

Option 3 — Cut back on your drinking

Option 4 — Carry on with drinking the way you do now

Which of these feels like the best choice for you?

Record your choice below and on the top of page 19.

If you're thinking about cutting back (option 3), say by how much. (Examples: reduce my drinking by 1 or 2 drinks per day; take 1 or 2 days off per week from my drinking; switch from multi-shot mixed drinks to beer or wine coolers)

I'm going to...

1.

2.

3.

Tips for drinking less.



PLAN AHEAD

If certain people or places lead you to drink more than you want to, develop strategies to help you avoid drinking in these situations. If drinking at home is a problem, don't have alcohol in the house. Welcome opportunities to meet friends who don't drink alcohol or drink very little. When an urge to drink hits, accept that it will crest like a wave and pass. Remind yourself of your reasons for changing and focus on healthier ways to spend your time.



FIND FUN

Fill free time with positive people and hobbies that increase your health and well-being. Find better ways to feel comfortable in social situations, manage your moods and cope with your problems. Get involved with an activity that doesn't involve drinking.



EAT FOOD

If you drink, don't do it on an empty stomach. Eat food so the alcohol will absorb into your body slowly.

While eating healthily, don't forget that a side effect of drinking can include weight gain. Just a 142 ml glass of wine has 125 calories and a 341 ml bottle of beer has about 130 calories.



PACE YOURSELF

If you drink, have no more than one standard drink per hour. Make every other drink non-alcoholic.

Things to remember



1

For the next two weeks, keep track of how often and how much you're drinking using the tracking tool on the next page.

2

Notice how drinking affects your mood and relationships.

3

Deal with things that may be getting in the way of changing.

4

Accept support from your doctor, nurse, friend or someone else you trust.



Personal tracker

Keep track of how many “standard” drinks (pages 2–3) you have for the next two weeks.



BEER/COOLER (341 ml)



WINE/LIQUEUR (142 ml)



MIXED DRINKS/HARD LIQUOR (43 ml)

TOTAL

MONDAY TUESDAY WEDNESDAY THURSDAY FRIDAY SATURDAY SUNDAY

MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY	SATURDAY	SUNDAY
WEEK 1				DATE:		



BEER/COOLER (341 ml)



WINE/LIQUEUR (142 ml)



MIXED DRINKS/HARD LIQUOR (43 ml)

TOTAL

MONDAY TUESDAY WEDNESDAY THURSDAY FRIDAY SATURDAY SUNDAY

MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY	SATURDAY	SUNDAY
WEEK 2				DATE:		

Record what you learn

As you work on changing your drinking, keep track of what you learn below.

How has drinking less affected your mood and sense of wellbeing?

How has drinking less affected your relationships with other people?

What have you learned that will make it easier for you to drink less in the future?

END OF PART ONE

BUILDING ON THE PAST TWO WEEKS OF EXPERIENCE

In Part One (page 13), you said that you'd change your drinking in the following way:

What worked and what didn't?

Whether you made your planned changes or not, you may have had some difficult situations.

When taking steps to drink less, what steps didn't work as well as you wanted?

When taking steps to drink less what steps worked well for you?

In what situations was it harder to drink less?

- ☐ Parties
- ☐ Weekends
- ☐ Friends
- ☐ Family
- ☐ Celebrations
- ☐ Feeling happy
- ☐ With meals
- ☐ When using cannabis
- ☐ When using tobacco
- ☐ When feeling frustrated
- ☐ When feeling bored
- ☐ When feeling depressed
- ☐ When feeling lonely
- ☐ When feeling nervous
- ☐ When feeling angry
- ☐ When stressed at work
- ☐ When arguing

☐

☐

☐

☐

☐

Thinking about change

How **much** were you able to reduce your drinking so far?

0

1

2

3

4

5

Less than I planned

As much as I planned

More than I planned

How **important** is it for you to keep working on drinking less?

0

1

2

3

4

5

Not very important

Very important

How **ready** are you to keep working on drinking less?

0

1

2

3

4

5

Not very ready

Very ready

How **confident** are you that you can reduce how much you drink?

0

1

2

3

4

5

Not very confident

Very confident

What alcohol use changes do you want to work on now?

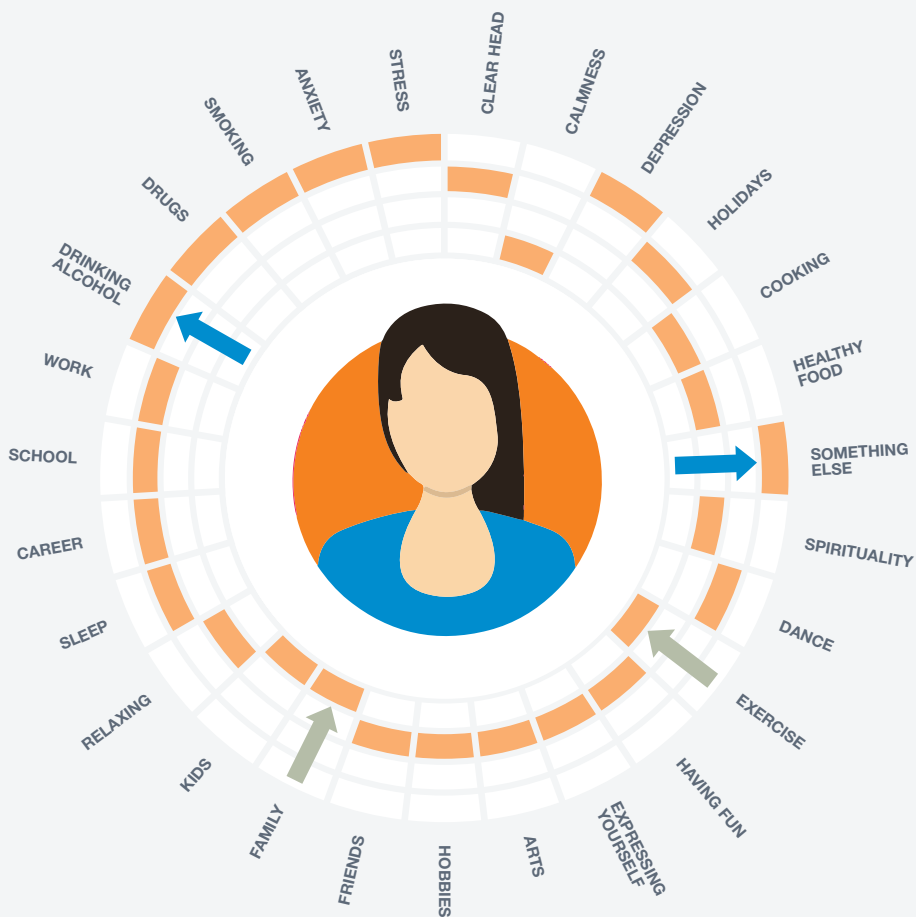
- ☐ I want to work toward the same goals as before.
- ☐ I want to work on maintaining the changes I've already succeeded in making.
- ☐ I want to ...

What things could you do now to help you reach these goals?
For example, are there any ideas from what you recorded on page 18?

Change is hard.
It takes time and can be slow at first.
That's OK.

The BIG picture

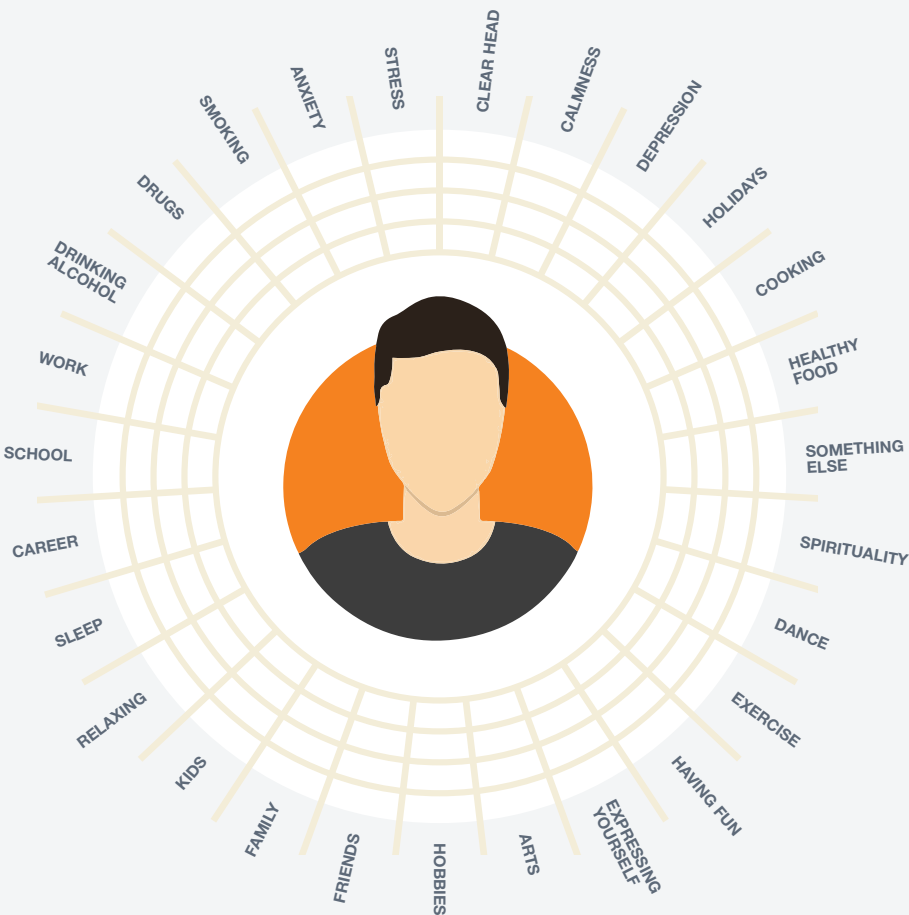
Managing your drinking is easier if you work toward healthier living overall. Have a look at the example below of a completed lifestyle chart and then use the blank chart on the next page to complete your own. This person wants to push some things away from the centre of her life, such as anger, and alcohol use. She also wants to bring some things closer to the centre of her life, such as family and exercise.



What's important to you?

Shade in the boxes closer to you for the things that you would like to make a larger part of your life.

Shade in the boxes further away from you for the things that you would like to make a smaller part of your life. Keep this BIG picture in mind as you continue to work on reducing your drinking.



Be ready to say “no thanks”

Planning comfortable ways to deal with pressure can help you stay on track. Some reasons you could use include:

- “No thanks, I’m driving.”
- “No thanks, I just finished one.”
- “No thanks, I’d like to wait a few minutes.”
- “No thanks, I’m on a diet.”
- “I have an exam tomorrow and want to be clear-headed.”
- “I have a big game tomorrow and want to be in shape.”
- “I told my family I would cut down.”

Think of what you can say if you are offered a drink.

When people offer me a drink, I will say:

Reward yourself

It helps to reward yourself when making hard changes. By drinking less, you are saving time and money that you could now use for other things.

For example, you can spend more time with friends and family, exercising, exploring a new sport or activity or going to a concert or movie.

How many **hours** each week did you usually spend on getting or using alcohol before starting to use less?

	HOURS
--	-------

What will you do with the **time** you are saving now by drinking less?

How many **dollars** each week did you usually spend on alcohol before starting to use less?

	DOLLARS
--	---------

What will you do with the **money** you are saving now by drinking less?

Build connections

Keep in mind the people or groups who can support you as you change your drinking habits. Consider spending more time with people who care about your health and well-being.

People or groups who can support you include:



What's important to you?



1

For the next two weeks, keep track of how often and how much you're drinking using the tracking tool on the next page.

2

Notice how drinking affects your mood and relationships.

3

Deal with things that may be getting in the way of changing.

4

Accept support from your healthcare provider (e.g., doctor, nurse), friend or someone else you trust.



Personal tracker

Keep track of how many standard drinks you have for another two weeks.



BEER/COOLER (341 ml)



WINE/LIQUEUR (142 ml)



MIXED DRINKS/HARD LIQUOR (43 ml)

TOTAL

MONDAY TUESDAY WEDNESDAY THURSDAY FRIDAY SATURDAY SUNDAY

MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY	SATURDAY	SUNDAY
WEEK 3			DATE:			



BEER/COOLER (341 ml)



WINE/LIQUEUR (142 ml)



MIXED DRINKS/HARD LIQUOR (43 ml)

TOTAL

MONDAY TUESDAY WEDNESDAY THURSDAY FRIDAY SATURDAY SUNDAY

MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY	SATURDAY	SUNDAY
WEEK 4			DATE:			

Record what you learn

As you work on reducing your drinking, keep track of what you learn below.

How has drinking less affected your mood and sense of wellbeing?

How has drinking less affected your relationships with other people?

What have you learned that will make it easier for you to drink less in the future?

END OF PART TWO

More Information

You've arrived at the end of the workbook, but you can keep reaching for your goals. Build on the changes you've already succeeded in making.

Go back and answer again the questions starting on page 4. This time, apply the questions to the past month. You can do this every month to confirm your progress.

If you ever feel that your risk level is not getting as low as you'd like, consider going through the workbook again while also getting advice from your healthcare provider.

It's all about your well-being, making healthy choices and getting help when needed.

You can do it!



More information

If you haven't been able to change your drinking because of strong cravings or because you have a hard time stopping after 1 or 2 drinks, you can ask your doctor about medications or support to help control cravings.

Canada's Guidance on Alcohol and Health

www.ccsa.ca

Rethink Your Drinking

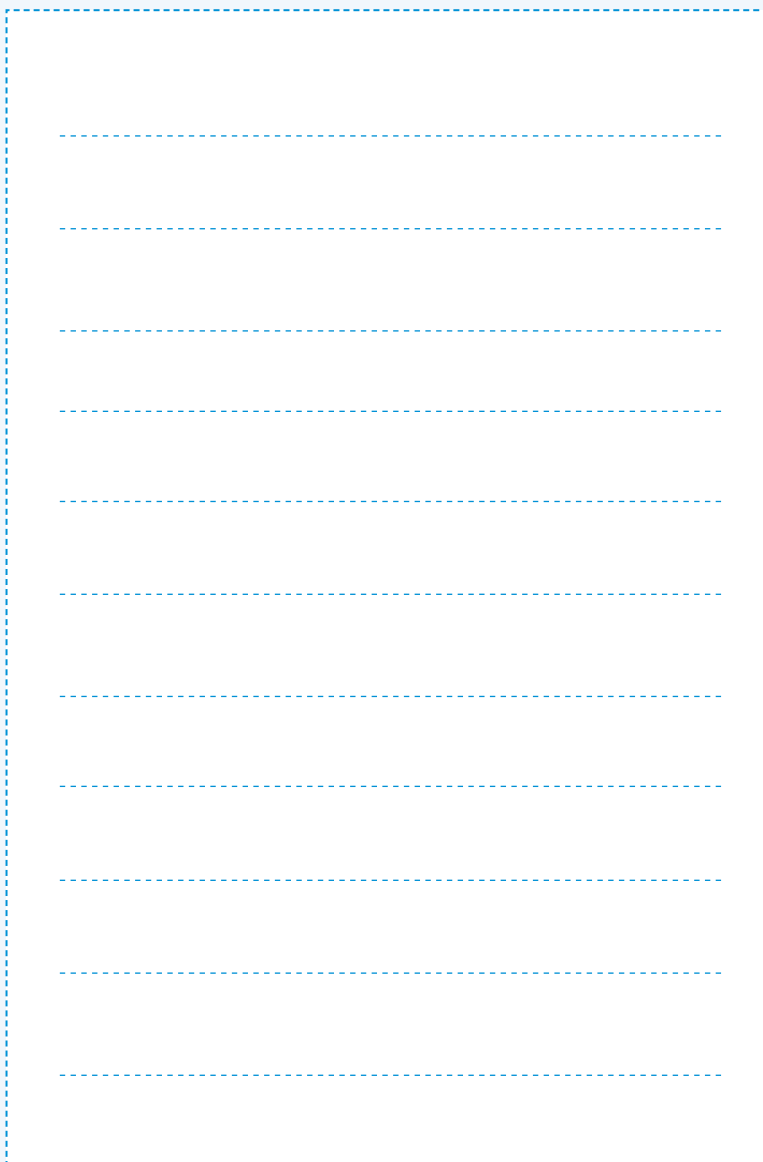
www.rethinkyourdrinking.ca

Saying When app

www.camh.ca

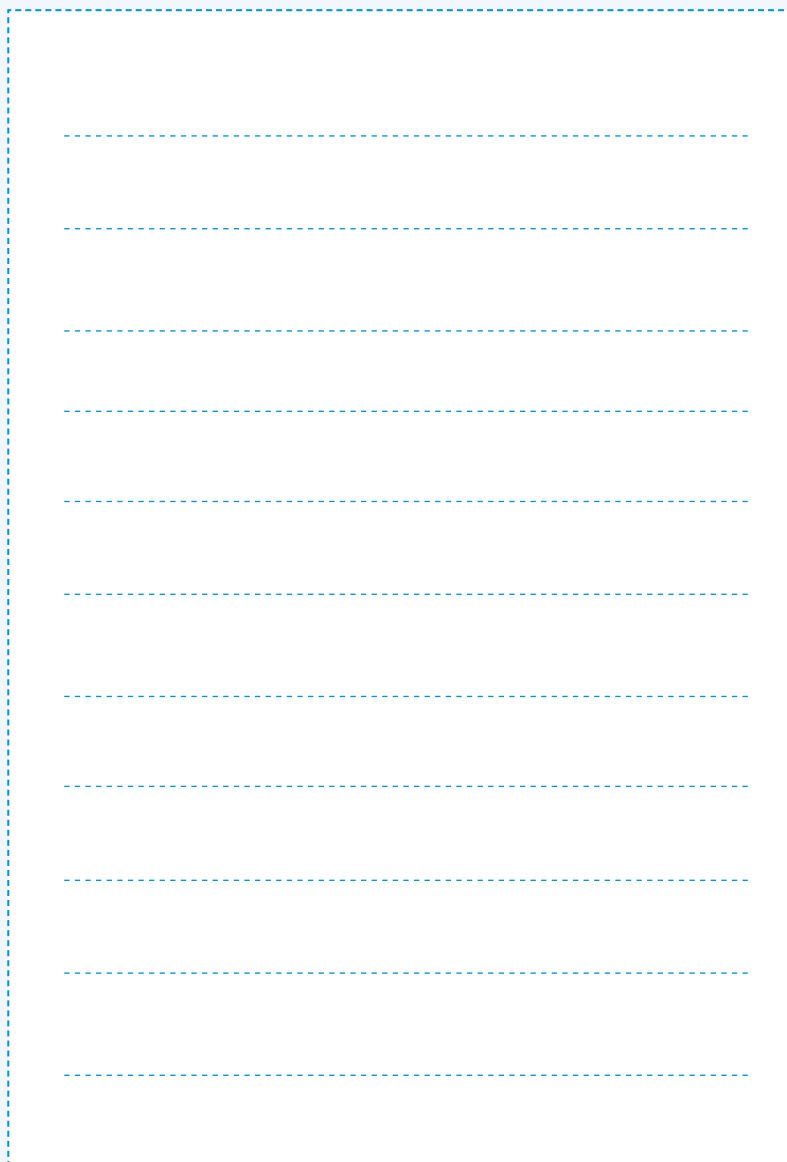


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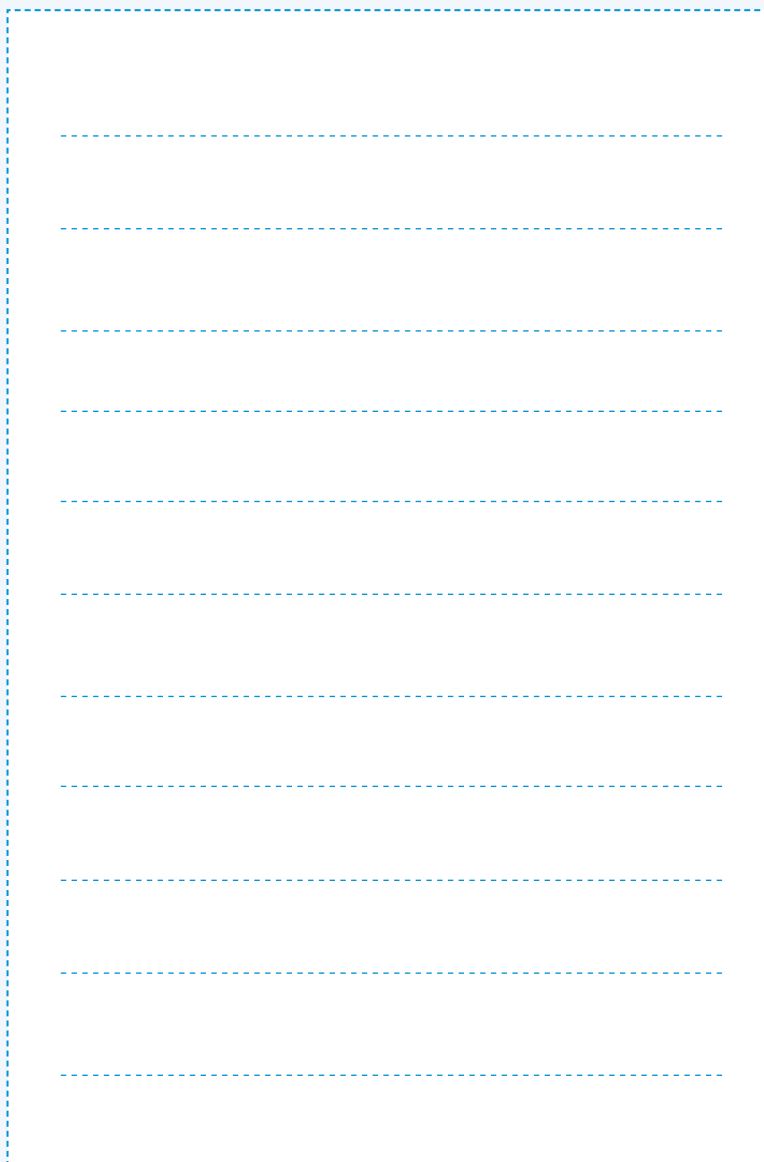
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Notes



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