

Telling the Story

of Alcohol Use and Impacts in Simcoe Muskoka



Acknowledgements

SMDHU would like to thank all of those who took the time to talk with us and to share their stories about the impact of alcohol. Forty people across Simcoe Muskoka, including representatives from 20 community agencies, contributed their time and volunteered their stories which have been woven together into the Story of Alcohol. This project could not have happened without them.

SMDHU would also like to recognize the work of Think Communications – who facilitated the conversations and transcribed the stories and anecdotes as accurately as possible in this document.

Forward

Alcohol plays an interesting role in our lives. It has long been accepted as a way to enhance social interactions and is part of many cultural events. There are even recognized health benefits: low levels of alcohol consumption have been associated with cardiovascular benefits for some individuals.¹

On the other hand, as little as 1-2 drinks per day increases the risk of certain types of cancers, and moderate to excessive drinking is associated with increased risks of heart disease, and may increase the risk of dementia.¹

The effects of alcohol overconsumption on public and personal safety are perhaps even of greater consequence, as the larger community is called to deal with issues like addiction, binge drinking, driving under the influence, mental health problems, unplanned pregnancies and violent behaviour.²

This report shines a light on what some people in our communities think about the impact of alcohol use. People — young and old, urban and rural, community support partners and community residents — throughout Simcoe Muskoka shared their insights and stories. This is what they said...

Most people we spoke to were in agreement about light or moderate alcohol use: it's enjoyable in a social setting where it complements a meal, where alcohol is not the focus, where one or two drinks seems just right. This philosophy is in line with the Canada's Low-risk Alcohol Drinking Guidelines.

Many have seen the other side, too, where overuse leads to costly consequences. Bar patrons or party guests who've had too much to drink, get aggressive and start a fight. Or get into their vehicle, unable to see straight, sometimes ending up a statistic after a crash. Or go home and take their frustrations out on their family with verbal or physical abuse. They wonder about the silent, secret drinker who self-medicates in their home.

They note that a range of support personnel -- doctors, police, paramedics, and addictions and mental-health counselors — deal with the after-effects. Helping people with chronic overdrinking issues and those whose occasional overuse puts them or others in the emergency room with a slew of alcohol-related injuries creates a significant social toll and financial toll on our communities.

Throughout our conversations, there is the oft-asked question: why do we overuse alcohol in the first place?

“ I always promote drinking within the recommended guidelines for safe alcohol consumption. If we can stick by those guidelines we'll have much better health outcomes. ” — Dr. Matthew Myatt, family, physician in Alliston

Impacts:

Moderate alcohol use has an accepted place in our society. It's seen as promoting relaxation and sociability, as an enjoyable part of celebrations. As our community members note, however, its overuse can have serious social and financial costs.

SOCIAL

feeling threatened or unsafe

Many people say they alter their own behaviour or worry for their safety when they're around people who have overconsumed alcohol.

A university student thinks twice before walking downtown at night. "I've seen fights outside of bars that have been influenced by alcohol or just individuals walking down the street that are under the influence of alcohol. 'Maybe I'll avoid that area because I know people will be drinking.'"

People who work in public spaces, from library staff to restaurant servers, admit to feeling uncomfortable when they have to deal with people who are inebriated. It's also disturbing for patrons. "It really raises the anxiety level... People are afraid they're going to get hurt," says the director of a local food bank.

A paramedic remembers getting into a rolled-over car to assess someone whose behaviour — acting confused, repeating themselves over and over — suggested a serious head injury. He knew the car could have broken glass or sharp, protruding metal inside; it could be at risk of catching fire or contain dangerous fluids or chemicals. When all was said and done, however, the patient's mental fog was the result of intoxication, not trauma.

“Going into a residence where there are a dozen or more people who are heavily intoxicated can be quite intimidating and dangerous for paramedics, especially if some sort of criminal activity might have taken place.”

— Stuart McKinnon, Senior Operations Paramedic, Medavie EMS Ontario

To say nothing of dealing with intoxicated patients once they're in the ambulance. It can be difficult to manage people "who become confused, agitated or upset and potentially violent" when there's only one paramedic in the back and one driving.



● Alcohol behaviours among North Simcoe Muskoka youth in Grades 9 to 12 are significantly higher than the province in the following areas: Hazardous/harmful drinking (drivers Grades 10 to 12).

(Boak et al., 2013)

risky behaviour

We can obviously make some pretty poor decisions, then, when we're under the influence. Alcohol affects our central nervous system, impairing speech, vision, coordination, concentration and judgment. Inhibitions are lowered, making risky behaviour more likely.

A community member looks back on high school days. He laughs and acknowledges that when you're not used to consuming alcohol, you can overdo it and make choices based on the moment at hand rather than potential consequences.

"Inhibitions are lowered and you think things like, 'At least I'm having sex and I'm fitting in,' instead of looking down the road, where it might be, 'Now I have a kid. What am I going to do?'"

College students often learn the hard way that overusing alcohol can put their health and their place in the community at risk. A residence coordinator at a community college tells of one student who drank so much on a chilly Halloween night that he got lost.

"He ended up finding his way back to campus; he and his friend were so cold they ended up kicking and then breaking some of the doors to the school." Such instances of vandalism are not out of the ordinary when students overuse alcohol and typically result in probation and the possibility of eviction.



Drinking and driving remains one of the riskier choices we make when we've overconsumed. We don't weigh the costs of paying for a cab against the costs of being pulled over or even being involved in a collision – we feel invincible, says one community member. "It's never going to happen to me." Or, "Home is just five minutes away. I can make it."

Transportation is an issue: in a rural community both adults and teens can feel their entertainment options are limited because there is no public transit system. One area resident noted that many inter-community friendships are built because students in Oro, Brechin and Rama must come into Orillia to attend high school. "When it comes to drinking, and no actual transportation between those regions, how are they going to get home?" asks one young adult. "If you throw a party of 20 people [and] you don't have 20 spaces for people to stay... it's going to be a \$30 or \$40 cab. That's kind of price-prohibitive."

violence and domestic abuse

Tina lies in bed. It's time to sleep but she's wide awake. She's keeping an ear out for Daddy to come home. She knows from other times that when he's out so late he's likely to talk funny, his words slurred, when he returns. His voice will get louder and angrier until Mommy says, "No, Frank, no!" A chair will crash to the floor and there will be sounds of a struggle. Sometimes Tina worries Daddy might be angry at *her* tonight.

Alcohol use and domestic abuse often occur behind closed doors, but the signs are visible in public, too. A server in a restaurant remembers a family coming in, the father drinking throughout the meal and becoming angry at his partner. In the end, there were "police outside and a broken window."

“Alcohol use can play a significant part in domestic disturbances.” – Southern Georgian Bay OPP Constable David Hobson

The OPP see a correlation between alcohol and violence of all kinds, especially during the summer and on holidays. “Calls for service do go up for family disputes and domestic abuse and things of that nature,” says Constable Sheryl Eason, Abuse Issues Coordinator, Nottawasaga OPP Crime Unit.

relationship stress, chance of success

Alcohol overuse and everything that can go along with it – abusive behaviour, loss of employment, injuries and even death – are a significant cause of relationship loss.

Family physicians often see broken families when alcohol overuse is an issue. Sometimes it’s the parent putting stress on the relationship; sometimes it’s the children. “I do see children [affected], or even where the parents have children caught in an addiction to alcohol. Their lives are sort of spiraled down along with them,” says Dr. Grant Ho.

Kids can wind up having to fend for themselves when a parent has a drinking problem, and they don’t always make it to school. There is a 14-year-old living alone for days at a time because Mom is out drinking. There’s a 15-year-old boy in charge of his household, figuring out how to put food on the table.

“If we look at childhood development, all those kinds of pieces, everything changes; the whole dynamic changes,” says Kevin Gangloff, a youth centre director.

Sonja Hillis, a teacher at an alternative school, says, “My students, like a lot of teenagers, drink because it’s a social norm, they’re bored, or they’re using it as a coping strategy. In most cases it does not directly impact their school work; however, there may be some indirect impacts as a result

of the people they choose to associate with, and their ability to cope with stressors in the classroom.”

The partyer lets fitting in and having a good time interfere with school work, recalls a retail worker in Bracebridge. “You go to the party so you can fit in with your friends, so you don’t do your homework. So that test on Tuesday, you’re going to bomb it. So your grades go down and you don’t get into the university you want or the program you want. That’s actually your life – when you’re out of that, you’d be, like, ‘Well, why did I do all that?’ It’s so hard to go back and fix it all.”

A number of community members noted that when people in the workforce drink to the point they can’t function in their role, they lose their job. If they can’t access rehab at this point, they may wind up “falling through the cracks; they lose the ability to earn money and support the community as well. So everybody loses.”

quality of life, property values

On weekends and holidays the citizens who live close to downtown areas grit their teeth, ear plugs at the ready, and the police are on speed dial. They’ve seen and heard it all: from noise, littering and vandalism to street confrontations that escalate into people getting hurt and emergency responders being called, they just wish people coming out of the bars could keep themselves in check.

“If an area is known to have a large amount of noisy parties and alcohol then that may impact your property value,” notes a city staff member. “The downtown neighbourhood residents certainly feel that their property values are impacted by having people leaving the bars and their behaviours after that.”

If we are to reduce the harms and costs that come with alcohol:

- injury
- chronic disease (cancer, high blood pressure, diabetes)
- violence
- impaired driving
- health-care costs
- enforcement
- mental health consequences
- unwanted pregnancy
- fetal alcohol syndrome

...then we must work together to change alcohol’s role in our society.

Canada's Low-Risk Alcohol Drinking Guidelines

These guidelines were developed to help Canadians of legal drinking age make informed choices about alcohol consumption and to encourage a culture of moderation.

These guidelines recommend drinking no more than:

Women: 2 drinks per day or 10 drinks/week

Men: 3 drinks per day or 15 drinks/week



35.5% of Simcoe Muskoka adults (19+) report they do not follow the Canadian low risk drinking guidelines. (CCHS, 2012)

HEALTH

Dr. Matthew Myatt, an emergency room (ER) doctor and a family physician based in Alliston, sees the effects of both chronic and occasional overuse. With long-term use, he cites heart disease, liver cirrhosis and failure as well as effects on the brain as consequences.

Injuries from occasional overuse, or binge drinking, are seen more frequently in the ER.

These cases wind up in ER in a variety of ways, but one young woman may owe her life to a Huntsville OPP community service officer, Lynda Cranney. When Cranney was “working the road,” she saw a teenage girl “on the sidewalk passed out.” The signs of binge drinking were apparent and she was taken by ambulance to hospital. “She definitely suffered from alcohol poisoning, so they had to pump her stomach and she spent a few days in hospital.”

Binge drinking results in a myriad of injuries. Dr. Grant Ho, a family physician and ER doctor in Orillia, deals with the result of “teenagers experimenting, or the weekend partyers. We see that a lot in Emerg – Friday night, Saturday night – where they overdrink and they do things they shouldn’t. There’s obviously drinking and driving, but there’s the brawls, the altercations, the falls, the injuries that are self-inflicted.”

A group of friends exiting a restaurant late at night is loud and rowdy, belting out their favourite drinking songs. Patrons leaving the bar across the street take issue with their choice of music and a fight breaks out. Emotions run high and the ability to control tempers is low: one person suffers a broken nose when he is shoved against a wall and another, sprawled out on the sidewalk, is later treated for a broken rib.

A managing director of a downtown business association says this type of incident is typical when downtown patrons overdrink. “Or they’ve fallen into something and hurt themselves, or trip.”

Research says there is a clear link between alcohol and mental health; how they affect each other is a chicken-and-egg question. It’s known that alcohol lowers your levels of serotonin – a chemical that helps regulate your mood. If you already have a mental-health issue, drinking alcohol can make your condition worse.

“I’ve heard doctors say many times the best way to cure depression for some people is to stop drinking. It’s a depressant. We have people who are extremely depressed and they constantly drink. So you need to manage both to achieve wellness.” – Dave Hewitt, Community Mental Health Services worker

For a person being treated for mental-health issues, mixing alcohol and medication can exacerbate symptoms, and people have been known to miss counselling appointments because they opted to drink that day.

Bobbi-Anne Colyer, the director of wellness at a retirement home, said she sees alcohol use causing falls and “depression, [lessened] self-worth, increased agitation, irregular sleep patterns” in seniors she works with.

“Alcohol is the one substance that has been proven to cause prenatal birth defects,” says Jan Aikins, who works with pregnant women with addiction issues. Memory, language and communication problems are often seen in children born with Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD), which can occur when women consume alcohol during pregnancy.

COMMUNITY COSTS

People can see the costs of alcohol overuse affecting their pocketbook, whether insurance rates go up because of incidents related to drunk driving, or taxes go up to fund emergency response, community-support programs and treatment options that are necessary because of alcohol overuse.

health services

Doctors in our area see occasional over-drinkers more frequently than chronic alcoholics in the Emergency department.

A man is at a 40th birthday party. Caught up in the spirit of celebration, he has a few more drinks than he is accustomed to. As he is leaving, his feet play tricks on him and he takes a tumble, hitting his head. He is brought to ER where, because of changing consciousness, doctors order a CAT scan to see if further treatment is necessary.

A local ER physician describes alcohol overuse as “a big cost” to our health system. It encompasses expenses from running tests to implementing treatment options in both family practice and emergency room settings.

There are still the alcohol-dependent “frequent flyers” who show up in the emergency room “over and over for a problem that’s never resolved, whether it’s recurrent self-injuries from falls or altercations with other people. Or they’re so sick they have alcoholic liver disease and they’re near the end stage,” says Dr. Grant Ho.

In the ER he sees binge drinking more in younger adults, those who are partyers. The ones that have family, kids, are married, are fewer, but they do show up. Regardless of age, it’s clear to him that those who overuse alcohol “do affect the healthcare dollars.”

police services

It’s Saturday night and a couple driving home from the movies see a woman staggering along the sidewalk in the dark. It’s bitterly cold, she’s not wearing a coat, and she seems “out of it.” Concerned for her safety, they call the police. The officers find her so intoxicated she can’t tell them where she lives, so they take her to the station.

“Police are being called to respond less frequently to outright criminality and more and more to social incidents, many of which involve the use of alcohol,” says Midland mayor Gord McKay. “There’s a definite impact on our municipality, from the simple cost to taxpayers for having to police these situations to the upset in a family or a neighbourhood resulting from alcohol abuse.”

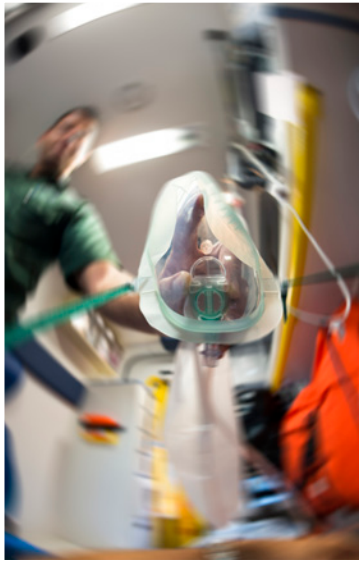
Additional policing is required when a patient or a scene represents a threat to Emergency responders because of alcohol use. Stuart McKinnon says, “If we know there’s a risk we’ll ask [the OPP] to go in first to assess the situation.... And if a patient is agitated or aggressive in the ambulance, oftentimes we’ll request an OPP officer to come with us to the hospital.”

More calls equal more cost, and this is particularly noticeable in the summer. As Officer Lynda Cranney observes, there’s more people in the area, so more alcohol-related calls. “You see the effects of alcohol after bar closing. We are often attending calls after hours, including domestic-related incidents.”



● A new report from the Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse (CCSA) highlights that substance abuse is an increasingly costly health concern in Canada. The cost of hospitalizing people with alcohol use disorders is significant, increasing 22% over five years to \$145 million in 2001.

(CCSA, 2014)



Contributing factors:

Although people interviewed in our community most often see alcohol being used in a socially acceptable way — to complement a meal or enhance a social situation — they are also aware that some of us consume alcohol to the point where it has harmful effects. They see a variety of reasons for this, ranging from cultural norms and peer pressure to its use as a way to cope with mental-health problems or the stresses of everyday life.

An evolution

Most people that I see: when they started using alcohol, [they had] a different reason. Maybe they started because they wanted to feel different or be part of the crowd, or to party and have a good time. Now they're using it to numb memories, or things that they're feeling. They have to drink more to get that same feeling... which impacts on the physical and mental wellness of the person.... They'll talk about when they started using and it was all [relatively] innocent. And now some of them are in their 50s and their life has been a train wreck. They're like, "I had no idea." – Dave Hewitt, Community Mental Health Services worker

boredom

Mary is taking a walk one night in her small community when she hears muffled laughter and the clink of bottles. "The kids are drinking down at the park again," she believes they're drinking because they have nothing else to do, and she's not alone. Many people see alcohol use as tied to a lack of other recreation options.

Even in larger communities there is a feeling people have no other way to be entertained or to socialize. A university student in Orillia notes that her friends "go out every weekend, both days typically. It's because they assume that's the only thing they can do." And a Barrie resident says a lot of people drink in his neighbourhood "because they have nothing better to do and they need a change of pace."

mental health

Both members of the public and community partners believe alcohol is often used to self-medicate mental-health issues.

“Many with mental-health problems tend to resort to alcohol as a way to self-treat. They may not go to the doctor; they end up trying to treat their own anxieties with alcohol.” — Dr. Grant Ho

Trauma is often responsible for mental-health issues. People can be traumatized by experiences such as abandonment, family violence, sexual assault, the death of someone close, or a stressful incident in the line of duty. "People with pain turn to pain numb-ers," says one member of the public.

barriers to getting help

People choose alcohol over healthier coping mechanisms for various reasons. In the stories told to us, they were most commonly related to stigma and to problems with knowing where and how to access other supports.

pride/stigma

A man in Bradford is down on his luck. He's lost his girlfriend and his job in one fell swoop. He starts to drink, just to take the edge off, to make himself feel a bit happier, even if just for a little while. He knows drinking is affecting his ability to get back on track, but when he considers the support services local community agencies offer, he vows to tough it out on his own.

"It's pride," says someone who's seen others go through this. "It makes them feel vulnerable or weak. You don't even want to accept help because you already feel so pathetic that you don't want to feel any more pathetic."

The thought of being judged adds to the struggle. "The stigmas that are out there, which are being fought now by mental-health-awareness programs, probably lead people to say "I'm going to have a few drinks" rather than call up a health line or a counselor," says a city mayor.

lack of services

People on the street talk about the struggle to get help for addiction issues: limited services and long wait lists. Unless you can afford to access it privately, say those in the support services, it can take as long as six months to get into a long-term treatment program.

Dave Hewitt, who works at Community Mental Health Services at Soldiers' Memorial Hospital in Orillia, knows what it means to try to fill the gaps. "I'll take somebody to detox down in Barrie, try and connect them with AA, connect with addiction counseling at the Canadian Mental Health Association, get them into group.



“ [It's] really difficult to give up a coping mechanism that works for you in the absence of anything else. ” — Jan Aikins, addictions counsellor, Umbrella

There's also the issue of access – many feel you need to be well educated or tapped into the system to get the help that's needed.

“Our current system is structured to support reasonably functioning individuals who can navigate it over time,” says a community street outreach worker. “For those experiencing a multitude of issues surrounding addictions, feeling stigmatized and marginalized and who aren't comfortable advocating for themselves, that's an added barrier.”

All walks of life

Kevin Gangloff, director of a youth centre: “Alcohol use doesn’t affect just one certain population.... There’s been youth that have the full family – they have everything that you would think you’d need to be successful in this world except there’s one issue that affecting their family and it tears apart the whole family.”

Dave Hewitt, a mental health services worker: “As much as I see people living in poverty, we’ve had doctors, lawyers, Bay Street people – all kinds of folks, very intelligent highly educated individuals that have lost everything to substance...”

NORMALIZED

cultural

As many in our community noted, alcohol is seen as a normal component of the Canadian social occasion.

The idea that it is part and parcel of socializing spans all generations. Peter Bowman, vice-principal of an area high school, says he understands that some kids will spend some portion of their teen years experimenting with behaviour they know parents might not like.

A mini-van pulls up at a popular high school sporting event. The parent who’s dropping off her son and a couple of his friends doesn’t ask to check what’s in the bag Johnny is carrying. Either she doesn’t want to know there’s a flask in the bag, doesn’t believe the kids would do that, or thinks underage drinking is an inevitable part of growing up.

“End of the evening, a parent is called to pick up a student caught drinking. They then protest our concern, which is actually [the] casual consent from parents to have alcohol consumed by their child. That is frustrating,” Bowman says.

Alcohol is typically associated with the university or college experience, too. A local residence coordinator says “I guess it’s just student culture.... You go to meet people, you go to socialize; oftentimes people are more comfortable when they’ve had a few drinks.”

Jan Aikins says many people don’t think twice about it. “It’s legal, so it’s something that’s very ingrained in our society. It’s used to socialize with, it’s used to celebrate. We even use it in religious ceremonies. It’s completely... ‘normalized’ would be a good word.”

generational

There’s a consensus in our community that if you grow up in an environment where alcohol is abused, you’re more likely to treat it the same way. “People here will tell me, “My brother drank, my mom drank, my dad drank, his grandfather drank. We’re a drinking family; that’s just what you do,” says Dave Hewitt.

Sonja Hillis teaches at an alternative school and hears stories about some students drinking with parents. “I would say it’s deemed as more acceptable because it’s something that is normal for them at home.”

“People have built their lives around the weekend... It’s like morning coffee for some people: weekend drinks. They might not even know why they’re doing it anymore; it just becomes something they do because it’s that time.” – a university student

peer pressure

The desire to fit in with the crowd is felt by many – by students, by young professionals, by retired dart players at the local service club. If your peers act like drinking is the thing to do, it can be hard to stand outside the group. Even designated drivers say they’ve been pressured to have a drink, despite the known risks of impaired driving and the purpose of having a designated driver.

There seems to be “this idea that you need to be drinking to be social,” says a university student.

media influence

We are bombarded with media messages telling us we need to drink to be social, to be desirable, to have a good time. No one is immune.

“In movies where there is a party, there’s always alcohol,” a university student observes; they seem to suggest being outgoing or having fun is related to drinking alcohol, he says.

Others note that women are targeted with ads for fruity coolers and wines with cute names like “Girls Night Out.” Ads for high-end beverages are meant to appeal to those who want to be seen as discerning and sophisticated.

The ads don’t sell their particular product so much as the idea that you’ll have the lifestyle that comes with it: “people dancing, having a good time, cheers at the end,” says a community member —everyone good-looking and fit.

““ You look at the media coverage and wherever you go you see young people having fun and having celebration with booze as part of the party. It’s glorified through sports, through fashion; it’s glorified everywhere. ”” – Kim Doughty, Living in Balance Coordinator, Muskoka Community Services

seasonal/recreational activity

Simcoe Muskoka, with its lakes, ski hills and scenic landscapes, is a popular destination for cottagers and year-round tourists. The focus on relaxation and getting away from it all is conducive in many people’s minds to a party atmosphere.

“It’s about having a good time,” an 18-year-old resident says. “It’s always about the drinking.”

Drinking-related activities are likely to increase in summer, says another resident. “Obviously it’s nicer and people are out and wandering and more willing to have bonfires and stuff.”

Constable Eason sees an increase in calls in the hotter months because people are consuming more alcohol. Family disputes, domestic abuse, more house and bush parties... “alcohol’s a factor in a number of those.”

Paramedic Stuart McKinnon is seeing “an increase in off-road – like four-wheeler, snowmobile – and boating collisions as a result of alcohol. I think just because we’re kind of in the playground of Ontario, if you will – cottage country. It results in an increased amount of injuries, illnesses and potential violence.”



What now?

Our community members were extremely generous with their time and insights and shared their stories with compassion and care. As we can see from their comments and observations, alcohol use is an accepted part of our daily and celebratory lives.

For those who drink within the low-risk drinking guidelines, it can enhance social experiences with others. The consensus seems to be that alcohol use in and of itself is not the issue – it's when it causes harm to individuals and our community that it becomes a problem.

We heard stories about what happens when we overconsume alcohol, either on a chronic or occasional basis, and what can happen when overdrinking is normalized – it's sometimes seen as a rite of passage or just part of the social scene – or when people turn to alcohol as a way to deal with problems. We are recognizing that when we drink to excess, our health, relationships and safety is affected, which also has a cost to our larger community.



Get Involved

The time has come to question the role of alcohol in our lives... to see it for what it is, and to support those needing assistance. Our community members' insights and experiences with alcohol use and its impacts in Simcoe Muskoka highlight many aspects of the issue. Many of the impacts and contributing factors can be addressed and here are just a few ways you can get involved:

Gather interested community members together including local business and politicians to talk about issues concerning alcohol and what can be done to address these in your community

Review your local Municipal Alcohol Policy and see where and how alcohol is allowed in your community. Some communities restrict advertising on public property (bus shelters, rec centers, event centers, public events) while others confine alcohol to designated locations to allow for families to participate in local events, music festivals and fun days. Communities can use zoning regulations to create safe entertainment spaces, with a diversity of businesses, for all ages.

- Be aware of alcohol-related corporate sponsorship of your local community events
- Advocate for improved public transit and recreational opportunities for youth
- Ask your local MPP to ensure the Ministries of Health and Justice (police) are included in the discussion of alcohol access in your community
- Write a letter to your editor regarding particular alcohol related issues in your community and ways they can be addressed
- Join the conversation on local alcohol related issues on twitter @SMhowmanydrinks or submit a guest blog to howmanydrinks.org
- Call the Health Unit for more information or to discuss your ideas with us at 1-800-721-7520.



Tel: 705-721-7520
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www.simcoemuskokahealth.org
Your Health Connection

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