

Fact Sheet on Alcohol as a Risk Factor for Breast Cancer

1. Alcohol use is clearly a risk for breast cancer.

a. "The association between alcohol consumption and breast cancer risk meets several criteria for causality, such as consistency of results, strength of association and biologic gradient. If alcohol consumption is judged to be a cause of breast cancer, the level of relative risk, because alcohol consumption is relatively common, translates roughly to a population attributable risk of 4% in developed countries. That is, about 4% of new cases of breast cancer can be attributed to drinking alcohol, and in Canada this year, it means that alcohol will account for an astounding 700 new cases. What is important here is that alcohol consumption is one of the few known risk factors for breast cancer that is a potentially modifiable behaviour at both the individual and the societal level" - Dr. Kristan Aronson, "Alcohol, a recently identified risk factor for breast cancer", CMAJ, April 29, 2003, 168(9)

b. "Preventing Alcohol-Related Breast Cancer: Appropriate Perspective and Effective Population-Level Policies", Norman Giesbrecht, CAMH, for 17th Annual Breast Cancer Awareness Day, Presented by Scotiabank Group, October 21, 2003, Toronto

- "Two case control studies found intensity of drinking to be associated with breast cancer more strongly than duration of exposure (Bowlin et al. 1997; Levi et al. 1996)
- "Authors found significant risks for breast cancer corresponding to daily consumption of two drinks or two glasses of wine (25g/day) (Corrao et al, 1999)
- "They found a 10 percent higher risk being seen among women reporting approximately one alcoholic drink per day as compared with non-drinkers" (Ellison et al, 2001) (Bibliography available on request)
- "Alcohol related harm is determined by the volume of alcohol consumption, as well as by how it is drunk".

2. Young women, 16-20 are regular consumers of alcohol. This age group is also identified as being part of the largest group of heavy drinkers for both genders. Definitions vary for heavy/hazardous drinking, but this age group rises to the top of any study addressing higher risk drinking.

- a. Approximately 15.9% of Ontario students between Grade 7 and Grade 12 are currently drinking in patterns that are called hazardous as defined by the World Health organization's "Alcohol Use Disorders Identification Test" as "a pattern of drinking that indicates the likelihood of future medical and physical problems". The percentage of students increases from Grade 7 – 12 (about 30%). Ontario Student Drug Use Survey 2005, Centre for Addiction & Mental Health.

- b. Heavy drinking (defined in this study as more than 4 drinks on one occasion for women) and drinking in excess of the Low Risk Drinking Guidelines is more common among Canadians 18-24 years of age than among older people. Residents of Quebec, Ontario and British Columbia have the highest rates of weekly drinking, and drinking frequency increases with higher education and income (Canadian Addiction Survey, March, 2005)
- c. Women aged 20-24 report as the greatest percentage of female drinkers in Canada who engaged in “binge-drinking” or drinking more than five drinks on one occasion, 12 or more times in past 12 months. This number has increased annually from 1994 (13.3%) to 2001 (26 %). Statistics Canada Health Indicators Vol. 2003, No.2
- d. Drinkers in Ontario (male or female) who regularly consume more than five drinks on one occasion either equal the national rate, or surpass it. Statistics Canada, Health Indicators, Vol, 2003, No.2
- e. The 1998 Canadian Campus Survey showed that 62.2% of female university students reported drinking at least once a month and almost a third at least once a week. Of the drinkers, 56.1% reported drinking 5 or more drinks on at least one single occasion since coming to school in September of that year. (Glicksman, Louis et al, Heavy Drinking on Canadian Campuses, Canadian Journal of Public Health, 2003)
- f. In the most recent iteration of this survey, statistics for heavy drinking have not changed and the most notable regional differences concern episodic heavy drinking. The proportions of past month drinkers reporting 5+ and 8+ drinks at least twice over the period were significantly lower in Québec (34.3% and 11.2%, respectively) and higher in the Atlantic provinces (49% and 24.4%, respectively,) and in Ontario (45.4% and 20.3%, respectively). (Canadian Campus Survey, September 2005)

3. Heavy drinking patterns while young are linked to an increased risk of breast cancer when older

- In a study completed by the Cancer Research Group in the UK, 2002 (http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/entrez/query.fcgi?cmd=Retrieve&db=pubmed&dopt=Abstract&list_uids=12439712) it was demonstrated that a woman's risk of breast cancer rises by 6% for each extra alcoholic drink she consumes on an average daily basis (7% on international measures)
- In 2003, Dr. Mac Armstrong, the Chief Medical Officer of Health in Scotland reported in his Annual Report to the Scottish Health Department, “Although breast cancer is currently very rare in young women, the data now available suggests that an 18-year-old who

makes a habit of binge drinking is building up a significant breast cancer risk in 20 to 30 years time. “