

Youth Engagement:
**Opening the Door
to Difficult
Conversations**

Toolkit

Module 8:
**Alcohol
Awareness**

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For more information, please contact us at:

Saskatchewan Prevention Institute
1319 Colony Street, Saskatoon, SK, S7N 2Z1
Business (306)-651-4300 Fax (306)-651-4301
skprevention.ca.

saskatchewan
preventioninstitute
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Module 8: Alcohol Awareness

Background

Alcohol use is normalized in our society. In fact, the majority of Canadians consume alcohol (Health Canada, 2020). Despite its prevalence, it is crucial to recognize that alcohol is a drug that can have a variety of health impacts. It can influence multiple organs, raise cancer risk, and weaken the immune system (Bagnardi et al., 2001; Lees et al., 2020; Runggay et al., 2021; Sayon-Orea et al., 2011; Szabo & Saha, 2015).

Canada's recent *Guidance on Alcohol and Health* highlights that there is no known safe amount or type of alcohol (Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction, 2023). People who drink alcohol are advised to decrease the frequency and amount of alcohol consumed. For youth, it advises delaying alcohol use for as long as possible. Alcohol use at an early age can affect the developing brain and can interfere with its functioning (Lees et al., 2020). Alcohol slows down or depresses the activity of the brain, which in turn can cause slower reflexes and reaction times and inhibit the various centres in the brain that regulate judgment and impulse control. Alcohol use can lead to risk-taking behaviours, including unprotected sex. Unprotected sex can increase the risk for acquiring sexually transmitted infections, as well as unintended pregnancies. Educating youth about the consequences of alcohol use can allow for informed decision-making.

Objectives

- Nurture critical thinking skills by analyzing tactics used in alcohol advertisements.
- Explore the reasons why individuals may choose to drink alcohol.
- Introduce alternative methods to cope with stress.
- Understand the short- and long-term effects of alcohol use.

Material

- Flipchart/whiteboard
- Index cards
- Pens/markers
- Alcohol Use Effects handout (printed)
- Alcohol Use Effects handout answer key

Activity 1: Alcohol Advertisement

While sitting in a circle, encourage participants to recall alcohol advertisements that they have seen on TV, billboards, or online. Facilitate a discussion focused on exploring how advertisements can influence our perceptions and choices.

Discussion questions:

- Can you describe the advertisement? Are there any visual elements that stand out to you?
- Was there a slogan used?
- What do you think the primary theme or message of the advertisement was?
- Do you think the advertisement was designed to make you feel a certain way about alcohol?
- Do you think there are implied messages about the effects of alcohol? Are these messages accurate?
- Who do you think is targeted in this advertisement?

Facilitator's Tip: If youth say they believe that advertisements provide an accurate portrayal of alcohol use, do not contest them in this activity. Acknowledge their perspective and suggest that they remember this viewpoint for upcoming activities. This reaction can help create a sense of continuity between the different parts of this module. Remember to come back to this discussion at the end of this module after having discussed the consequences of alcohol use.

Activity 2: Rethink the Drink

Begin this activity by briefly discussing the topic of alcohol use and its prevalence among young people. Alcohol is a commonly used substance and there are many reasons that motivate people to drink or not drink.

Part One: Behind the Drink

For this activity, encourage participants to think critically about the various reasons why people may drink alcohol. Write down their responses on the whiteboard as they share their ideas. There are no right or wrong answers in this section but encourage participants to think beyond the obvious reasons and consider social, cultural, emotional, and personal factors for alcohol use.

If needed, use probing questions to guide the brainstorming session:

- What situations or occasions do you think might lead someone to drink?
- How might different emotions play a role in people's motivation to drink?
- What positive outcomes do people associate with drinking?
- How can being around people who drink influence someone's motivation to drink?
- What can influence someone to drink when they are unsure?

Refer to the reasons brainstormed and copied to the flipchart or whiteboard. Facilitate a discussion about the variety of reasons listed.

Part Two: Balanced Coping

Keep the brainstormed reasons from Part One displayed for this activity. Explain that alcohol can sometimes be used to help cope with stressful situations. While it may provide temporary relief for some, alcohol use is not a long-term solution and can potentially create more problems. That is why it is important to explore a range of coping strategies that are healthier and more sustainable in the long run.

Provide participants with index cards or sticky notes. Instruct them to write down healthy alternatives to drinking that can help in coping with various stressful situations.

If needed, use probing questions to guide the brainstorming session:

- How do you currently handle stress or difficult situations?
- What activities make you feel better when you are going through a tough time?
- Are there any physical activities that you enjoy that help you clear your mind?
- Do you prefer to spend time indoors or outdoors when you are stressed?
- Are there specific people you rely on when you are feeling down?
- Are there any techniques you have used to help you relax when you are feeling overwhelmed?
- Have you read or been told about coping strategies that sound like they might be helpful, but you have not tried yourself?

Collect the responses and anonymously read out the strategies listed. Facilitate a discussion about the strategies and ask participants to share their thoughts on their effectiveness and potential benefits. Encourage participants to think about the suggested alternatives and reflect on suggestions that they believe can work for them.

Activity 3: Exploring the Drinking Continuum

Begin this activity by explaining that different people have different alcohol use patterns. Ask participants if they think that most young people their age choose to drink. Inform them that in reality, most young people in Canada aged 15-19 years choose not to drink. The Canadian Alcohol and Drugs Survey (2019) found that 54% of youth (15- 19 years) do not drink.

Draw a horizontal line on the flipchart or whiteboard that represents the alcohol use continuum. Ask participants to brainstorm different levels of alcohol consumption and patterns, ranging from no drinking to alcohol dependence. Try to link the continuum to the motivations to drink in the previous activity. Can these motivations be placed on different levels of the continuum?

If needed, use probing questions to guide the brainstorming session:

- Can you think of examples of different drinking patterns and behaviours that would be placed at different ends of the continuum?
- Where would someone who rarely drinks alcohol be on the continuum? What about individuals who only drink on special occasions?
- How might someone's reasons for drinking influence their placement on the continuum?
- Can you think of situations or contexts that might lead someone to move along the continuum?
- How do cultural norms or social influences play a role in where individuals fall on the drinking continuum?
- How do you think that using the coping strategies identified in the previous activity would influence someone's position on the continuum?

Facilitator's Tip: Make sure that you capture the following drinking patterns on the continuum: non-drinking, experimental drinking, occasional drinking, regular drinking, alcohol misuse, and alcohol use disorder/ dependence.

Activity 4: Continuum of Risk

Keep the continuum of use from the previous activity visible for this activity.

Part One: Introduction

Begin by explaining that alcohol is not just a beverage; it is considered a drug. Drugs are classified into several categories based on their effects. The main drug categories are stimulants that increase alertness and brain activity, depressants that slow down the brain's activity, and hallucinogens that alter perception and cause sensory distortion. Alcohol is considered a depressant because of the way it affects the central nervous system in the brain. It slows down or depresses the activity of the brain, which in turn can cause slower reflexes and reaction times and inhibit the various centres in the brain that regulate judgment and impulse control.

Like any other drug, alcohol use is regulated through a legal framework in Canada. In Saskatchewan, the legal drinking age is 19 years. This means that the sale of alcohol to anyone under the age of 19 is not permitted.

While the legal drinking age is 19, it is important to note that alcohol use is not recommended before the age of 25 for several reasons including:

- The brain, especially the areas responsible for decision-making, impulse control, and risk assessment, continues to develop well into the mid-20s.
- The developing brain is more vulnerable to the harmful effects of alcohol.
- The longer alcohol initiation is delayed, the less likely it is for dependence to develop.

Facilitator's Tip: It is important to inform youth that regular drinking can lead to dependence.

Dependence can be challenging and affects various aspects of an individual's life including relationships and overall well-being. Seeking support is a sign of strength and can help individuals in achieving their health goals. There are helplines, support groups, and healthcare providers that can provide the needed support.

Explain that alcohol, like any drug, has short- and long-term effects when used.

Short-term effects are those that occur shortly after consuming alcohol and are often experienced within a few minutes to a few hours of drinking. Short-term effects are directly related to the presence of alcohol in the bloodstream. The short-term effects usually wear off after the body clears alcohol from its system. However, the actions and choices we make while under the influence don't just disappear once the alcohol is out of our system.

Long-term effects are often more severe and develop over a longer period of time. These effects are usually the result of prolonged alcohol use.

Ask youth to list some factors they think may influence the intensity of short- and long-term effects of alcohol based on what they have learned so far.

Facilitator's Tip: Facilitate a conversation about the varying factors that influence short- and long-term effects of alcohol such as the amount of alcohol consumed, the duration in which the alcohol is consumed/how fast it is consumed, age, environment, underlying health conditions and medications taken. Link this discussion to the continuum of alcohol use. As we move farther along the continuum of use, the risk of experiencing long-term effects increases.

Part Two: Sorting Alcohol Effects

Divide participants into groups of four or five and provide each group with a pen and list of alcohol effects. Instruct each group to read through the list of alcohol effects and collaboratively decide whether each effect belongs to long-term or short-term category. Explain that the list was created using evidence from scientific research.

Once groups are done, facilitate a discussion about each effect and ask groups what they classified it as. Use the opportunity to clarify any misconceptions and reinforce understanding about the specific effects and their categorization. Encourage participants to ask questions and engage in respectful discussion.

Facilitator's Tip: If you don't want to divide participants into different groups, engage them in a game where you describe an alcohol effect, and they must quickly determine whether it is a short- or long-term effect.

Facilitate a discussion using the following questions:

- Were there any effects that we discussed that surprised you?
- Does the knowledge of these effects influence the way you perceive alcohol?
- How can understanding both the short- and long-term consequences of alcohol use help you make informed decisions in the future?
- Do you think some types of alcohol are safer than others? (*Discuss that some drinks may contain less alcohol concentration than others, but no kind of alcohol is safer than others.*)
- Based on the effects we have discussed; do you think alcohol should be avoided by people in certain situations? (*Discuss the importance of zero alcohol when pregnant, driving, operating machinery, or taking certain medications*)
- Do you think that everyone who consumes alcohol experiences the same long-term effects? (*Discuss how drinking more can increase the risk of experiencing health problems, and that other factors can interact with alcohol to influence the risks (e.g., genetics, existing state of health, other drugs and/or medications)*)

- What are the steps that individuals can take to minimize the risk of experiencing both short- and long-term effects of alcohol? *(Discuss the importance of delaying drinking as much as possible, and setting limits when they begin drinking. Explain that Canada's Guidance on Alcohol and Health states that there is no amount of alcohol that is good for health and that drinking less is always better.)*

Check Out: After having discussed alcohol use, the reasons people may drink, and the potential consequences of alcohol use, go back to Activity 1. Ask participants to reevaluate if their perceptions of the accuracy of alcohol advertisements have changed in any way. Allow them some time to reflect on how the insights they have learned today may have influenced their understanding of the impacts these advertisements can have.

Alcohol Use Effects Handout

Effect	<i>Write down if this effect is experienced short-term or long-term.</i>
Alcohol poisoning	
Brain damage	
Cancers (colon, rectal, breast, throat, esophagus, and liver)	
Cardiovascular disease	
Cognitive impairment	
Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder	
Hangover	
High susceptibility to infections	
Lapses in memory	
Liver disease	
Loss of consciousness	
Lowered inhibition	
Overweight and obesity	
Risk of fall and injury	
Slurred speech	
Social dysfunction	
Stomach ulcers	
Unprotected sex	
Vandalism	
Vehicle collisions	
Violent or aggressive behaviours	
Vitamin deficiency	
Vomiting/Diarrhea	
Weak bones (osteoporosis)	
Worsening academic/professional performance	

Alcohol Use Effects Handout Facilitator Answer Key

Effect	<i>Write down if this effect is experienced short-term or long-term.</i>
Alcohol poisoning	<p><u>Short-term</u> Occurs when high levels of alcohol are consumed and is characterized by confusion, vomiting, slowed breathing, unconsciousness, and/or seizures. Alcohol poisoning is an emergency and can be life-threatening without medical attention.</p>
Brain damage	<p><u>Long-term</u> Prolonged alcohol drinking can cause changes in brain structure and function and affect overall brain health. While it can affect individuals of all ages, it can particularly affect youth as their brain continues to develop.</p>
Cancers (colon, rectal, breast, throat, esophagus, and liver)	<p><u>Long-term</u> Research shows a clear link between alcohol use and many types of cancer including colon, rectal, breast, throat, esophagus, and liver cancers.</p>
Cardiovascular disease	<p><u>Long-term</u> Alcohol can increase the risk of developing high blood pressure, stroke, and diseases of the heart muscle.</p>
Cognitive impairment	<p><u>Short-term</u> Drinking alcohol can cause temporary impairment in judgement, reduced coordination, and slower reaction times.</p>
Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder	<p><u>Long-term</u> When consumed during pregnancy, alcohol can reach the unborn baby and affect their development. This can have life-long impact on the developing child.</p>
Hangover	<p><u>Short-term</u> Set of symptoms that occur after drinking too much alcohol in a short period of time. It is characterized by fatigue, headache, dehydration, nausea, and light and sound sensitivity. The risk for hangovers can be</p>

Effect	<i>Write down if this effect is experienced short-term or long-term.</i>
	decreased by drinking less. While there's no way to instantly cure a hangover, it is recommended to drink water and rest to decrease symptoms and allow the body to recover.
High susceptibility to infections	<u>Long-term</u> High levels of alcohol use can weaken the immune system and decrease the body's ability to fight off infections.
Lapses in memory	<u>Short-term</u> Commonly referred to as "blackouts". Refers to partial or complete memory loss of events occurring while under the influence.
Liver disease	<u>Long-term</u> Prolonged alcohol use can damage the liver and lead to many different types of liver disease including fatty liver, liver scarring (cirrhosis), inflammation of the liver (hepatitis).
Loss of consciousness	<u>Short-term</u> Consuming excessive amounts of alcohol can cause someone to pass out. This can be a sign of alcohol poisoning.
Lowered inhibition	<u>Short-term</u> Alcohol can impact decision-making ability and can lead to risk-taking behaviours.
Overweight and obesity	<u>Long-term</u> Due to its high caloric content, alcohol can contribute to weight gain.
Risk of fall and injury	<u>Short-term</u> Alcohol can increase the risk of fall or injury because of its effect on balance, coordination, and reaction time. The lowered inhibition can also increase the risk of injury because of lowered risk-assessment abilities.
Slurred speech	<u>Short-term</u> While under the influence of alcohol, speech can be slower and difficult to understand.

Effect	<i>Write down if this effect is experienced short-term or long-term.</i>
Social dysfunction	<u>Long-term</u> Alcohol can increase the risk of conflicts and social isolation.
Stomach ulcers	<u>Long-term</u> Alcohol can irritate the stomach and cause the development of ulcers. It can also slow down the healing of preexisting ulcers.
Unprotected sex	<u>Short-term</u> Lowered inhibitions and impaired judgement can lead to risk-taking behaviours, including unprotected sex. Unprotected sex can increase the risk for acquiring sexually transmitted infections as well as unintended pregnancies. Engaging in sexual activity with someone who is intoxicated and cannot consent is sexual assault.
Vandalism	<u>Short-term</u> Reduced self-control can lead to reckless behaviours that may lead to vandalism. Vandalism can have legal consequences.
Vehicle collisions	<u>Short-term</u> Alcohol is a major cause of motor vehicle collisions. Impaired judgement, lower inhibition, decreased focus, and slowed reaction times can increase the likelihood of collisions. Driving while under the influence is illegal.
Violent or aggressive behaviours	<u>Short-term</u> Lowered inhibitions, impaired judgement, and personal factors can increase the risk of violent and aggressive behaviours while under the influence.
Vitamin deficiency	<u>Long-term</u> Prolonged alcohol use can affect the body's ability to absorb vitamins.
Vomiting/Diarrhea	<u>Short-term</u> Alcohol can irritate the digestive system and lead to vomiting and diarrhea.

Effect	<i>Write down if this effect is experienced short-term or long-term.</i>
Weak bones (osteoporosis)	<u>Long-term</u> Prolonged alcohol use can contribute to the development of osteoporosis, or weakened, fracture-prone bones.
Worsening academic/professional performance	<u>Long-term</u> Alcohol use can cause interpersonal challenges that strain academic and professional performance.