

SUGGESTED GUIDELINES FOR ALCOHOL USE

The decision to use alcohol or not is a personal choice. Each of us, at any age, is responsible for the consequences of our decisions. Choices about using or abstaining from alcohol based on a clear set of guidelines will enhance health and reduce the risk of experiencing the wide range of alcohol-related problems. These guidelines need to be set prior to drinking and adhered to carefully.

The following suggestions are based on current scientific information and common sense. They can be used to help people make healthy, safe and appropriate choices about the use and non-use of alcohol.

1. To use or not use alcohol is a personal choice for which each person is accountable.

No one should feel pressured to drink or uneasy or embarrassed because of a personal choice to abstain. Most people will choose to use alcohol safely, moderately, and appropriately. Others will simply have no desire to experience the effects of alcohol. Some people with a family history of chemical dependency or alcoholism may choose not to risk any use of alcohol. The bottom line is that no one should feel that he/she has to drink to be accepted.

2. Alcohol use is not essential for enjoying social events.

The real value of parties, recreational and other social activities is being with friends and taking time out from the pressure of school and work. Drinking alcohol should not be seen as a necessary component for having fun and being with friends. If alcohol is used, it can be an enjoyable complement to other activities, not the only reason for socializing. Actually, focusing on alcohol use as the main reason for a party can result in intoxicated people who get sick, cannot carry on a conversation, and generally are not much fun to be with after a while.

3. Illegal drug use has specific health, legal and ethical risks and should be avoided and discouraged.

Examples include:

- Unpredictable dosage
- Unpredictable purity
- Can result in a criminal record

4. There are times when it is important to abstain from alcohol or other drug use.

Examples include:

- When it is inconsistent with religious beliefs.
- When recovering from chemical dependency.
- When the alcohol or other drug use is illegal.
- When pregnant or nursing.
- When operating equipment—motor vehicles, motorcycles, boats, tools, firearms, etc.
- When swimming, skiing, climbing, or doing other risky physical activities.

- When at work or studying.
- When performing in athletics or fine arts.
- When taking certain medication.
- When drinking may create discomfort or problems for someone who has had an alcohol use problem.

Each of these situations presents specific risks and should be times when alcohol use is avoided.

5. Use of alcohol that leads to impairment or intoxication is unhealthy and risky and should be avoided and discouraged.

Getting drunk is not a condition to be admired, laughed at, or taken lightly. Rude, destructive, or just plain foolish behavior triggered by alcohol use is socially unacceptable. It may also indicate an alcohol use problem. Drinking games and traditions often result in drunkenness and can present serious risks for those involved. Driving after drinking to the point of impairment is always illegal and dangerous.

6. Tobacco is a drug that has significant risks and should be avoided and discouraged. (with the exception of ceremonial use of tobacco by American Indians)

The relationship between tobacco use and increased risk of heart disease and a variety of cancers and lung diseases has been clearly demonstrated. Current research efforts are further identifying the risks of secondhand smoke for nonsmokers. Tobacco is also considered a gateway drug for young people.

7. Medications should only be used as prescribed or according to directions and never mixed with alcohol.

Drugs, both prescription and over-the-counter, should be used only when needed, never shared and all labels and instructions should be read and followed carefully.

8. There are personal limits of moderations for anyone who chooses to use alcohol.

It is essential that everyone who chooses to drink alcohol knows his/her personal limit of moderation. It is important that each person set a limit before having any alcohol, as judgment can be affected after even a small amount of alcohol intake. For example, the risk of being involved in an alcohol-related traffic crash increases significantly at Alcohol Concentration levels above .04.

In recent years, the alcohol industry has developed advertising with simple messages about moderation. “Know when to say when,” and “Think when you drink” are examples of slogans that seem to encourage moderation when consuming alcohol. However, neither of these messages offer specific guidelines about the frequency or quantity of alcohol use. Other organizations such as Enjoy Michigan Safety Coalition have developed campaigns that offer more specific advice about if, when, and how much alcohol fits the concept of moderation. The 0-1-3 campaign suggests specific times when alcohol should not be used, offers limits of how much alcohol to consume at any one time, and also suggests a maximum frequency of drinking. The federal government has published “Dietary Guidelines for Americans” which recommends that if Americans choose to drink alcohol, they should do so in moderation. Moderation is defined as no more than one drink per day for women and no more

than two drinks per day for men. Similar to guideline three described on page 1, the U.S. Dietary Guidelines also suggest that some people should not drink at all.





Standard Drink	
All these drinks contain the same amount of alcohol.	
	One 5 oz. glass of wine
	One 1.5 oz. shot of liquor
	One 9 oz. wine cooler
	One 12 oz. beer

Table 5

Concise guidelines such as these offer clear guidance for the general public that, if followed, will reduce the risks of alcohol-related problems. Because these guidelines do not reflect individual differences in weight, age, time spent drinking, and other factors, they are often not completely accepted or followed. Despite criticism from some prevention specialists, alcohol concentration charts can also provide guidance about moderation for some people. Alcohol Concentration, or AC level, is the amount of alcohol in the blood in relation to other fluids in the body. The more alcohol in your blood, the greater the degree of impairment.

Generally, alcohol is eliminated from the body at the rate of just less than one standard drink per hour, or .015 AC level. However, a variety of other factors may also influence the level of alcohol retained:

Gender. Because of differences in body composition and chemistry, males and females are affected differently by alcohol. Men generally have more muscle and women more fatty tissue per pound. Fatty tissue has a smaller blood supply than muscle tissue, so more of the alcohol goes into the bloodstream. The result is that when a man and woman of equal weight drink equal amounts of alcohol, the AC level will be higher in the woman than in the man.

Body weight. Total body weight and the ratio of body fat to muscle affect the AC level. Lower weight and/or a higher ratio of fat to muscle result in a higher AC level.

Time. The number of hours you have been drinking affects your AC level. Unless you drink less than one standard drink per hour, your AC level will continue to increase over time. The body slowly eliminates the alcohol as follows: oxidation by the liver (95%), breath (2%), urine (2%), and perspiration (1%). The liver's rate of oxidation is constant and cannot be increased by drinking coffee, physical activity, or cold showers.

Strength and quantity of drinks. It does not matter what kind of alcohol you drink—what counts is how much. Table 5 highlights the fact that a 5 oz. glass of wine, a mixed drink with 1-1/2 oz. of rum, whiskey, gin, vodka, etc., a 9 oz. wine cooler, and a 12 oz. beer all contain the same amount of alcohol. It is very important to be aware that mixed drinks often contain more than 1-1/2 oz.

Food intake. Drinking on an empty stomach can have a greater effect on judgment and behavior than expected. At the same time, although a full stomach will slow down the absorption of alcohol, it is much less important than most people believe.

Age. Age is rarely considered in a discussion of AC levels, yet it is very important since the human body becomes less tolerant with aging. This is due

to a gradual change or slowing down of the metabolic rate. The ratio of body fat to muscle also increases with age. The effect of these factors is that the same amount of alcohol intake per body weight consumed by older people can result in higher AC levels, and the effects may last longer.

Age is also a factor for young people. Research shows that adolescents are involved in fatal crashes at significantly lower AC levels than those found in adults. Young people are just developing many adult skills, including driving, and these skills can be negatively affected at lower AC levels than in adults.

Mood. Although one's mood does not directly affect the AC level, the effects of alcohol can be greater than expected when a person is tired, stressed out, angry, lonely or dealing with any other strong emotion.

For those who choose to use alcohol, the Alcohol Concentration Work Sheet on pages 6-7 can help establish limits of safe, moderate and appropriate amounts of alcohol to drink. It is important to remember that, even at very low AC levels, some people will show evidence of decreased performance. There is ample evidence that many persons show impaired judgment at AC levels at or below .04. There is strong evidence that all persons show impaired behavior, including driving performance, at AC levels between .04 and .10.

9. There are ways to minimize health and safety risks when serving alcohol.

Examples include:

- Do not serve alcohol to underage youth.
- Emphasize friendship, conversation and other activities rather than drinking alcohol.
- Offer a variety of attractive nonalcoholic drinks that are readily available.
- Provide a variety of foods.
- Serve all drinks to guests rather than having an open bar.
- Inform guests whether or not beverages such as punch contain alcohol.
- Stay alert and assume responsibility to help a guest who may have had too much to drink.
- Create an environment that allows guests to feel comfortable making a personal choice about alcohol use or nonuse.

10. Avoid situations where someone else's alcohol, tobacco or other drug use may put you at risk.

Examples include:

- Not riding with an impaired or intoxicated driver.
- Using seat belts at all times to protect both drinkers and nondrinkers against being injured or killed in an alcohol-related crash.
- Exercising caution in unfamiliar environments.
- Recognizing high-risk sexual situations.
- Recognizing safety risks caused by a co-worker's impairment.

Summary

Preventing alcohol and other drug use problems can begin in very small ways by first examining our own attitudes and guidelines about use and nonuse. The guidelines

suggested here can provide a framework within which to examine the use of alcohol and other drugs and the use of alcohol as part of family and social events.

The need for guidelines about alcohol and other drug use is clear and the responsibility for establishing and following them is shared by all of us. We can affirm the right of adults to drink alcohol safely and wisely. We can share our concerns with those who drink or use other drugs illegally or inappropriately. We can support those who choose not to drink. We can be compassionate to those whose lives have been affected by alcoholism and other drug-related problems. Lastly, we can encourage discussions about alcohol use and be role models for healthy and appropriate choices about whether, when and how much to drink.

