

# GIRLS, ALCOHOL AND DEPRESSION

## A Backgrounder for Facilitators of Girls' Empowerment Groups



This info sheet has been developed by researchers at the British Columbia Centre for Excellence for Women's Health, in collaboration with Girls Action Foundation. It is intended to support the work of facilitators of girls' empowerment groups.

It presents current resources for facilitators on:

- What we know about girls' alcohol use, and links to depression
- Starting conversations with girls and sharing materials about alcohol and related health issues
- Group activities



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# Girls and alcohol: What we know

## GIRLS AND ALCOHOL USE

- Over 85% of Canadian girls aged 15-24 drink in excess of Canadian low risk guidelines<sup>1</sup>.
- Girls who start drinking before the age of 15 are more than twice as likely to become alcohol dependent at some time in their lives<sup>2</sup>.
- Girls are using alcohol at an earlier age and in greater numbers, and in some jurisdictions adolescent girls and young women are just as likely as boys and young men to engage in “binge” drinking (drinking more than 3-4 drinks per sitting)<sup>3</sup>.
- There is an upward trend in excessive alcohol consumption among young lesbian and bisexual women. Bisexual females are twice as likely to report “binge” drinking as heterosexual youth of the same age<sup>4</sup>.
- Binge drinking and smoking, both of which are associated with a variety of health risks, are strongly correlated for subgroups of adolescent girls, especially among young Aboriginal women<sup>5</sup>.

## GIRLS AND DEPRESSION

- Higher rates of depression are consistently documented among adolescent girls and women than their male counterparts. The female-to-male incidence of depression averages 2 to 1<sup>6-8</sup>.
- Canadian young women aged 15 to 24 are 1.5 times more likely than young men to report fair to poor mental health<sup>7</sup>.
- Mental health worsens as young people move through Grades 6 to 10, especially for girls<sup>9</sup>.
- Girls and women are twice as likely to be prescribed mood altering medications such as benzodiazepines as boys and men<sup>10</sup>.
- The Living as a Chameleon study<sup>11, 12</sup> identified anger as a neglected and misrepresented component of girls’ depression. Denied anger prevents girls from both protecting and knowing self – two key components of mental health and quality of life<sup>13</sup>.
- Girls in the Validity project<sup>14</sup> noted the importance of being heard and affirmed, over being labelled and medicated.

## MAKING THE LINKS: DEPRESSION, WEIGHT CONCERNs AND ALCOHOL USE

- Alcohol use and depression are more strongly related for adolescent girls than any other population. For many women, this association persists into adulthood and predicts other co-occurring health problems<sup>15</sup>.
- Young women are vulnerable to the three intersecting issues of depression, obesity and alcohol use. It has been found that women with an alcohol disorder at age 24 are more than three times as likely to be obese when they are 27. Women who are obese at 27 are more than twice as likely to be depressed when they are 30<sup>16</sup>.
- In spite of alcohol’s weight-gaining properties, girls who perceive themselves as being overweight and actively try to lose weight, or who engage in unhealthy (excessive) dieting behaviours drink more alcohol than girls with healthier weight-related attitudes and behaviours<sup>17</sup>.
- Girls ages 10-15 who report being highly concerned about their weight are nearly twice as likely to get drunk as those who are less concerned about their weight<sup>17</sup>.
- Adolescent girls who ruminate when dealing with stress (i.e. think excessively about a problem) are more likely to develop symptoms of depression, bulimia and substance use than adolescent girls who ruminate less<sup>18</sup>.

# Health impacts: Girls can't "keep up" when it comes to drinking alcohol

- Gender, weight, tolerance to alcohol and state of mind all contribute to the effect alcohol will have on an individual.
- The same amount of alcohol affects most girls and women more than boys and men. One reason is that females generally have less water in their bodies to dilute the alcohol<sup>19</sup>. Also, males have more of the enzyme gastric alcohol dehydrogenase, which breaks down alcohol in the stomach<sup>20</sup>. For girls and women, less alcohol is broken down in the stomach; more alcohol is absorbed into the bloodstream and sent to the brain.

## KEY SEX-SPECIFIC HEALTH RISKS OF ALCOHOL USE BY GIRLS

**BENIGN BREAST DISEASE** - A recent 10-year study (1996-2007) of more than 9,000 girls, ages 9 to 15, found that alcohol use boosts the incidence of benign (non-cancerous) breast disease, which has been linked to increased risk for breast cancer<sup>21</sup>.

**COMPROMISED BONE QUALITY** - Chronic heavy drinking in the teen and young adult years can dramatically compromise bone quality, increasing the risk of osteoporosis<sup>22</sup>.

**HYPERTENSION** - Risk increases 44% among young women who have more than 1.5 drinks, 5 or more days a week<sup>23</sup>.

**REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH PROBLEMS** - Alcohol use in puberty can disrupt maturation processes, resulting in irregular menstrual cycles, and absence of ovulation, endometriosis and infertility<sup>24</sup>.

**UNINTENDED PREGNANCY** - Up to 10% of Canadian teens report that using drugs or alcohol was the reason they had intercourse for the first time<sup>25</sup>. A U.S. study found that one in three young pregnant women (aged 14-21 years) had been drinking when she conceived<sup>26</sup>. Young women may consume alcohol over many weeks before realizing they are pregnant, increasing the risk of fetal alcohol spectrum disorder (FASD) and other birth defects and developmental disabilities.

## CANADA HAS LOW RISK DRINKING GUIDELINES

They say under under **Guideline 5 (Delay your drinking):**

"Alcohol can harm the way the body and brain develop. Teens should speak with their parents about drinking. If they choose to drink, they should do so under parental guidance; never more than 1-2 drinks at a time, and never more than 1-2 times per week. They should plan ahead, follow local alcohol laws and consider the Safer drinking tips (provided on the site)".

See <http://www.ccsa.ca/Eng/Priorities/Alcohol/Canada-Low-Risk-Alcohol-Drinking-Guidelines/Pages/default.aspx>

For these  
guidelines,  
"a drink"  
means:



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Developed on behalf of the National Alcohol Strategy Advisory Committee.

# Understanding alcohol use

Alcohol acts as a depressant, slowing down the central nervous system and brain functioning. We often think of alcohol as relatively harmless but in fact it is a major contributor to disease, disability, and premature death. For adolescents this translates into increased risk of injuries, suicide and alcohol poisoning, as well as long term health and social problems.

It can be helpful to think of alcohol (and other psychoactive drug use) as on a continuum. On the one end of the continuum is beneficial use and the other end problematic use. There can be many gradations of problematic use from potentially harmful (such as binge drinking on one occasion) to alcohol dependence or addiction.

- **PROBLEMATIC /HARMFUL/HAZARDOUS DRINKING** - Problematic, harmful or hazardous use can look like drinking while driving, or drinking which interferes with fulfilling responsibilities at work, school, or home.
- **BINGE DRINKING** - Episodic or binge drinking, refers to the consumption of four or more drinks in one sitting for adult women. In Canada, a standard drink of alcohol (ethyl alcohol or ethanol) contains 13.6 grams or 17 mL of absolute alcohol – the amount contained in a 12-ounce (341 mL) bottle of regular (5%) beer, five ounces (142 mL) of (12%) of table wine or 1.5 ounces (43 mL) of 80-proof liquor.
- **HEAVY DRINKING** - There are many definitions of heavy drinking, it is perhaps most helpful to think of heavy drinking as drinking above [low risk drinking guidelines](#). For women, the guidelines for low risk drinking are: no more than 10 drinks a week, no more than 2 drinks a day most days, no more than 3 drinks on any single occasion. In addition the tips for safer drinking (below) are recommended.
- **DEPENDENCE** - Also known as alcohol addiction and alcoholism is characterized by: a strong craving for alcohol; continued use despite repeated physical, psychological, or interpersonal problems; inability to limit drinking; physical illness when drinking stops; and the need to drink increasing amounts to feel the effects. There are two aspects to alcohol dependence: Physical and psychological dependence.

## TIPS FOR SAFER DRINKING

One of the most important actions a girls' group facilitator can take is to educate about safer drinking. Canada's "[low-risk drinking](#)" guidelines for healthy adults suggest spacing drinks an hour apart, and drinking no more than two standard drinks per drinking occasion, drinking in safe environments. Women who are pregnant, who have certain medical conditions, or who will be driving a vehicle or operating machinery, should avoid alcohol.

### Safer drinking tips include:

- Set limits for yourself and abide by them.
- Drink slowly. Have no more than 2 drinks in any 3 hours.
- For every drink of alcohol, have one non-alcoholic drink.
- Eat before and while you are drinking.
- Always consider your age, body weight and health problems that might suggest lower limits.
- While drinking may provide health benefits for certain groups of people, do not start to drink, or increase your drinking, for health benefits.

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

# Starting a conversation about alcohol and wellness with video clips

## ONLINE CLIPS ON THE RISKS AND CONTEXTS OF BINGE DRINKING FOR GIRLS AND YOUNG WOMEN

### Women and Alcohol: Underage

(<http://www.thestar.com/videozone/1089855--women-and-alcohol-underage-drinking>)

**Author:** Toronto Star

**Description:** Perspective of 17-year-old "Laura" on the pressures to drink. "Laura," as she wants to be known, took vodka to school in a chocolate milk container. At 16, she was raped, and went to rehab.

**Length:** 1:25 min

### Binge Drinking: Girls Night Out (YouTube)

(<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HAMl1MJECZ4&feature=fvsr>)

**Author:** Unknown

**Description:** As a young woman prepares to go out for the evening, she rips up her clothes, vomits in her hair and pours wine all over the carpet. Message: You wouldn't start a night like this so why end it that way?

**Length:** 0:41 min

### Australian Teenage Binge Drinking Commercial (YouTube)

(<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yWCUekDn7cw&feature=related>)

**Author:** North Sydney TAFE

**Description:** An anti drinking commercial made at North Sydney TAFE about the consequences of binge drinking. Message: Binge drinking can have consequences, are you ready for yours?

**Length:** 1:00 min

### Alot2Lose.com Videos by GirlTalk

(<http://grltlk.wordpress.com/2008/04/09/introducing-what-you-dont-know-on-alot2losecom/>)

**Author:** Girl Talk, Choices and consequences of Underage Drinking

**Description:** "What You Don't Know" videos emphasize the often overlooked social consequences of drinking featuring 4 stories of girls: 1) What You Don't Know 2) Busted 3) Alone 4) Benched

**Length:** Approx. 2:00 min each

### What's your problem?

(<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HSPedmfqR5U>)

**Author:** Reel Youth

**Description:** Researchers and support workers collaborated with an Aboriginal Girls Group in Chase,

BC to create this claymation project with a message around date rape and alcohol.

**Length:** 1:07 min

### "Every Drink Counts"

(<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BYwu-MPPwrU&feature=related>)

**Author:** Queensland Government

**Description:** TV Ad for Binge Drinking Part of Queensland Government Campaign highlights risk of assault for young women who are intoxicated.

**Length:** 0:49 min

## ONLINE CLIPS ABOUT EMPOWERMENT AROUND ALCOHOL USE

### Young Women and Alcohol- Cell Phone (YouTube Video)

([http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hMVhghkv\\_HE](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hMVhghkv_HE))

**Author:** Queensland Government

**Description:** This highly awarded Young Women and Alcohol campaign didn't focus on the negatives of drinking.. This clip focuses on empowering girls to make up their own minds about when and how much to drink.

**Length:** 1:01 min

### Girls Inc. and Communities that Care PSA

(<http://www.youtube.com/girlsincorporated#p/u/19/d3i6kdY3cwQ>)

**Author:** Girls Inc.

**Description:** Girls Incorporated is a non-profit organization that "inspires all girls to be strong, smart, and bold." PSAs by girls on "I don't drink because..."

**Length:** 0:50 min

### "From Stilettos to Moccasins"

(<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1QRb8wA2iHs>)

**Author:** Project partnership among University of Saskatchewan, the Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse, and the National Native Addictions Partnership Foundation.

**Description:** Video clip portrays the healing experiences of Aboriginal women, of all ages who have struggled with drug abuse and addiction.

**Length:** 4:31

# Resources to share with girls

## **How to Chill.ca** (<http://www.howtochill.ca/>)

A Girl's Guide to Surviving Stress is an interactive website for teen girls with tips on how to deal with stress. Created by the Child Development Institute who conducted a research project with 50 girls in Toronto to determine what makes them stressed, what does it feel like and what to do to cope with it. Among stress-related issues explored is pressure to try alcohol and drugs and to have sex.

## **The Signs of Trouble** (<http://unwasted.ca/the-signs-of-trouble>)

If you're worried that you or a friend might have a problem with alcohol abuse, check out Unwasted.ca to learn about possible signs of trouble and teaches the [Recovery Pose](#) to help save a peer's life.

## **Girl Talk** (<http://grltlk.wordpress.com/>)

An interactive website provides information to girls and their parents on alcohol-related choices for underage drinkers and consequences. The site also includes a visual graphic [Virtual Girl](#) illustrating some of the effects of alcohol on the body for girls and young women.

## **Let's Talk Poster** ([http://www.camh.net/Publications/Resources\\_for\\_Professionals/ARQ2/index.html](http://www.camh.net/Publications/Resources_for_Professionals/ARQ2/index.html))

This poster was designed by girls to educate health care providers about depression. Message: "I don't want to be treated, I want to be heard".

## **A Teen Guide to Parental Separation and Divorce** (<http://www.familieschange.ca/teen/index.htm>)

Developed by the British Columbia Ministry of the Attorney General, this website provides information about what separation and divorce mean in Canada, and how they might affect teenagers.

## **Virtual Party** (<http://www.virtual-party.org/en/vpmain5615.html>)

The virtual-party is written by a group of young people. Make some choices and pick up some pointers on how to keep the harm out of your party-style.

## **Recognizing Depression** ([https://knowledge.camh.net/amhspecialists/early\\_intervention/validity/Pages/recognizing\\_depression.aspx](https://knowledge.camh.net/amhspecialists/early_intervention/validity/Pages/recognizing_depression.aspx))

Websites that offer information for young people who are experiencing depression.

# Websites/Resources for facilitators related to girls alcohol and depression

Coalescing on Women's Substance Use: Linking Research Practice and Policy ([www.coalescing-vc.org](http://www.coalescing-vc.org))

Hear Me, Understand Me, Support Me ([http://www.camh.net/Publications/Resources\\_for\\_Professionals/Validity/Validity\\_Project\\_index.html](http://www.camh.net/Publications/Resources_for_Professionals/Validity/Validity_Project_index.html))

Girls Talk Program: Facilitator's Manual ([http://www.camhx.ca/Publications/Resources\\_for\\_Professionals/Validity/4058\\_GirlsTalk.pdf](http://www.camhx.ca/Publications/Resources_for_Professionals/Validity/4058_GirlsTalk.pdf))

Living as a Chameleon: A Guide to Understanding Girls' Anger for Girl-Serving Professionals ([http://www.yorku.ca/cvandaal/files/Anger\\_Research.pdf](http://www.yorku.ca/cvandaal/files/Anger_Research.pdf))

Note: many provincial and territorial substance use agencies have online self-help info on safer drinking

BC example is <http://www.carbc.ca/KnowledgeToAction/ToolsResources/AlcoholRealityCheck.aspx>.  
This includes a specific tool for calculating your risk level based on your drinking in the past week  
<http://carbc.ca/AlcoholRealityCheck.aspx>.



# Activities

## MY HEALTH, MY LIFE ACTIVITY

### Objective(s) & Context

1. Discuss what is “health”
2. Explore health from a holistic standpoint
3. Explore issues related to depression and young women

**Duration:** 45-60 minutes (depends on the size of the group)

**Group Size:** 5-30

**Age Group:** 5-15

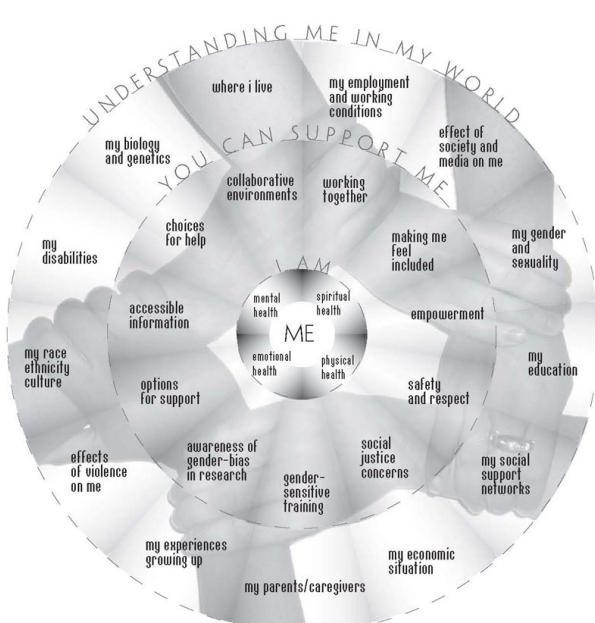
**Format(s) & Techniques(s):** large group, information sharing and group discussion

### Materials

- [My Health, My Health Framework](#) handout for each participant
- Internet access, laptop, iPad, LCD projector and screen (optional)

### Preparation

1. Make a copy of the [My Health, My Life Framework](#) for each participant
2. Set-up laptop, internet connection, LCD projector and screen for video. Cue image of [My Health, My Life Framework](#).



## WORKSHOP

### Part 1: Sharing information

- Introduce the topic: determinants of health for girls' and young women.
- Define 'determinants of health': the factors and conditions that affect health. Explain how these factors overlap and intersect to create unique situations for each individual.
- As a group or in small groups, ask girls to brainstorm some examples of determinants of health.

### Part 2: Handout

Hand out [My Health, My Life Framework](#) sheet to each participant or display in room on projector.

Ask girls to draw an “x” or an arrow in any area they think may be affecting their health and well-being.

### Part 3: Discussion

Which area of health do you think affects young women the most?

Which area of support do you think young women need the most?

How are mental, spiritual, emotional and physical health connected?

Is there an area on this sheet or not on this sheet affecting your health and how are you coping with this?

**Art Activity:** Ask young women to create posters, poetry or art on the ideas in My Life, My Health Framework.

### Tips

Be Prepared: Have local health resources on hand.

# Activities

## ACTIVITY ON SEX-SPECIFIC HEALTH IMPACTS OF ALCOHOL USE FOR GIRLS AND YOUNG WOMEN

### Objective(s) & Context

1. Understand what sex-specific (vs. gender-specific) health impacts are
2. Explore sex-specific health impacts of alcohol use for girls and young women

This activity asks girls to look at sex-specific health impacts of alcohol and consider what these impacts might mean for their own health and wellness.

**Duration:** 45-60 minutes (depends on the size of the group)

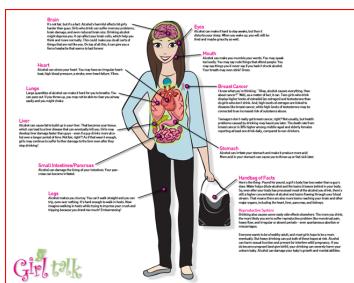
**Group Size:** 5-30

**Age Group:** 14+

**Format(s) & Techniques(s):** large group, information sharing and group discussion

### Materials

- [Virtual Girl Handout](#) (illustrating the effects of alcohol on the body) from [Girl Talk](#) a US interactive website provides information to teenage girls and their parents on alcohol-related choices and their consequences for underage drinkers.



- Internet access, laptop, iPad, LCD projector and screen (optional)

### Preparation

- Have a copy of the [Virtual Girl](#) for each participant.
- Set-up laptop, internet connection, LDC projector and screen for video. Cue image of Virtual Girl.

## WORKSHOP

### Part 1: Sharing information

- Introduce topic: physical health impacts of alcohol use for girls and young women.
- Share how sex differences influence drinking and how gender influences come into play as well (relational pressures, marketing strategies, etc).

### Part 2: Handout

- Hand out a Virtual Girl sheet to each participant and/ or display in room on projector.
- Read examples from the Virtual Girl illustration of how biological differences can impact how alcohol affects our bodies by talking.
- Talking points: <http://grltlk.wordpress.com/>

### Part 3: Discussion

Lead a group discussion on how alcohol affects our women's and girls' bodies.

- Does alcohol affect young men and women equally? Why?
- What physical consequences stand out for you the most?
- In addition to the physical health impacts, how might drinking affect your relationships with friends, family and significant others?
- Girls can "keep up" when it comes to drinking alcohol, true or false?

### Tips

Be Prepared: Have local resources on hand related to substance use for participants.

# Activities

## IT'S MY LIFE JOURNAL ACTIVITY

### Objective(s) & Context

1. To allow girls to critically reflect on their relationship with alcohol through journaling.
2. To discuss alcohol related situations and ways of dealing with them.

**Duration:** 45 – 60 minutes (depending on the size of the group)

**Group Size:** 10 -30

**Age Group:** 12+

**Format(s) & Techniques(s):** video(s), individual journaling, small group discussion and group sharing

### Materials

- [It's My Life Journal Page on Alcohol](#)
- Internet access, laptop, iPad, LCD projector and screen (optional)

### Preparation

1. Have a copy of the [It's My Life Journal Page on Alcohol](#) for each participant.
2. Set-up laptop, internet connection, LDC projector and screen for video. Choose a YouTube video(s) on girls and alcohol (see resource list for ideas) and cue [It's My Life Journal Page on Alcohol](#).

## WORKSHOP

### Part 1: Video(s) and Individual Journaling

1. Play YouTube video(s) on girls and alcohol.
2. Handout [It's My Life Journal Page on Alcohol](#) to each participant and/ or display page in room on projector and handout blank paper and pens.
3. Ask girls to reflect on the videos shown and fill in the blanks of the journal page.

### Part 2: Small Group Discussion

1. Divide participants into small groups of 3-5 persons.
2. Ask them to read each question and share their responses as willing.
3. Using flip chart paper, have participants write down the results of their discussion.

### Part 3: Large Group Discussion

1. Ask all participants to sit in a circle.
2. In turn, ask each group to read over the results of their discussion with the large group.
3. Lead a large group discussion using the suggested questions below:
  - Would anyone like to share examples of conflict that can happen in a relationship (with a friend, partner, parent, etc.) when you drink too much?
  - Would anyone like to share an example of time when they chose not to drink and why?
  - Would anyone like to share how they relate to friends about drinking?

### Tips

**Be Prepared:** Have local resources on hand related to substance use, children of alcoholics, counselling, etc. on hand for participants.

### Debrief

- Wrap up this activity by sharing information on how to stay safe, resources on how to get help or help a friend and where to go for information and support.
- This would be a good time to share pamphlets and fact sheets with participants.
- Now could also be a good time to segue way to a healthy living and healthy choices workshop.

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