

Talking About Alcohol Use

Suggestions on what to discuss with your health care team
to help you receive high-quality care



Ontario Health is committed to helping patients, health care professionals, and organizations improve the quality of health care in Ontario.

To do that, Ontario Health, through its Quality business unit, develops quality standards that set out important steps to treat conditions and situations like problems with alcohol use. These standards are based on current evidence and input from an expert committee that includes patients, health care professionals, and researchers.

If you're interested in the quality standard, see pages 12 and 13 to read a summary of the top ten areas to improve care for people 15 years of age and older with alcohol use issues. To read more, you can [download the quality standard here](#).



Why it's important to talk about alcohol use

You might be worried about the way you use alcohol. Maybe you think you drink too much, can't control how much you use, or drink to calm yourself down. You might also feel sick or anxious when you stop.

When you want to make changes, it can be hard to know where to turn or what you need to know to feel better.

If you're concerned about the way you use alcohol, use this guide to start conversations with your doctor or another care professional. It doesn't tell you everything you need to know, but it explains the kind of care that will help you make changes. It includes questions on:

- Having problems with alcohol use
- How a care plan can help
- Treatments for alcohol use
- Dealing with withdrawal symptoms

If you don't have time to go through the whole guide, use this checklist when you talk to your doctor or another care professional.



Did you know?

Talking to a health care professional about your alcohol use can be difficult. But it can help to know that you aren't alone and that a lot of support is available to help you feel better.



Write it down

It can help to take notes as your symptoms develop and change.

Having details on hand when you talk to your health care professionals will help you describe your experiences clearly.

You can use this guide each time you visit and review your care plan with your care team.



Do I have a problem with alcohol use?

If you think your alcohol use is causing problems, screening—a brief series of questions—will show if alcohol use is putting your health or safety at risk. Doctors' offices, the emergency department, and mental health and addiction settings all offer routine screenings.

Signs and symptoms of problems with alcohol use

You may have problems with using alcohol if:

- You crave alcohol and have trouble limiting how much you drink
- You've tried to stop but can't
- Alcohol has interfered with your school, work, or home life
- You've done unsafe things after using alcohol

Depending on your screening results, a health care professional will ask you more questions about different areas of your life and health, including:

- Your physical health
- How you're feeling emotionally
- Your drinking habits
- If you have problems with using other substances
- If any areas of your life (at work, school, or home) affect your alcohol use
- If you want to change how you use alcohol

Your health professional can also order medical tests to check for health issues that are linked to alcohol use. If you're not getting the help you need from your main health care professional, ask for ways to find other support.



See quality statements 1 and 2, page 12, for more information on how screening can help people who have concerns about their alcohol use.



Tell your care team:

If you've tried to get help for your alcohol use in the past. If so, where did you go for help?



Did you know?

People have different reasons for using alcohol. Difficult events or experiences in someone's life can have a strong emotional impact—known as trauma—that lasts long after the situation is over. Bad experiences in childhood, accidents, or violence are all traumatic events.

People who have experienced trauma are at higher risk for problems with their alcohol use. Your care team should consider how trauma plays a part in your alcohol use. You don't have to share the specific details of your trauma, but your care team can help you find support if you need it.



Learn more

This guide shares some resources that can support your care and answer even more of your questions about alcohol use.

[ConnexOntario](#) (1-866-531-2600) is a free, confidential information and referral service that is available 24 hours a day, every day. They can:

- Listen, offer support, and provide strategies to help you meet your goals
- Provide basic education about problems with alcohol or mental health



How a care plan can help

A care plan is like a map that helps you take specific steps toward getting better. If you decide to change how you use alcohol, your health care professional or counsellor can work with you on a personal plan that will support your well-being. Your care plan will be designed just for you, but it could include:

- Setting goals
- Taking specific actions, like finding a peer support group
- Ways to cut down on alcohol use
- Joining a formal program to help you with alcohol use



See quality statement 4, page 12, for more information on how a care plan can help you.

Your plan will change over time as you work to change your alcohol use. You should continue seeing your health care professional on a regular basis.

I lived by that original plan to the letter. It's gone on to evolve. But there are components of that plan that are still an integral part of my life every day.



PERSON CHANGING THEIR ALCOHOL USE



Tell your care team:

- If you can't follow parts of the plan, or about any barriers
- If the plan doesn't suit your goals or needs
- If you'd like to play a bigger role in creating the plan



Treatments for alcohol use

Treatments that can help you with alcohol use range from different types of counselling or therapy to alcohol treatment programs, peer support, and, in some cases, medication that can help you stop drinking. Everyone's care plan will be different, and you might try different therapies before finding the right combination. Talk to your care team about the therapies that fit your needs and goals. You may find other supports that work for you.

Counselling and therapy

In counselling, a trained counsellor or therapist talks with you one on one or in a group.

Medication

Some medications can help stop the craving for alcohol by changing your reaction to it. Other medications can also help you to stop consuming alcohol.

Treatment programs

Treatment programs combine different types of services to help you with your alcohol use. Options include day programs and residential (live-in) programs. They usually combine individual counselling or psychotherapy ("talk therapy"), peer support, and education to help you focus on your well-being and work toward your goals.

Managed alcohol programs

These programs are another way to support changes with alcohol use. People in these programs are prescribed an alcoholic beverage at regular intervals to help stabilize their drinking patterns.



See quality statements 8 and 9, page 13, for more information on different treatment options.

Peer support

Peer support groups bring together people going through the same experience with alcohol use to help each other through the changes they're making.



A peer support story

When Joseph joined a treatment program for help with alcohol use, he was proud of taking that step but found it hard to share the experience with his friends. They didn't seem comfortable talking about it, he says. He later found a peer support group—people who were going through the same thing and could relate.*

"It was a place where you could share the best and the worst of your recovery. You could trust them," he says.

"It was invaluable."

**Not his real name*



Tell your care team:

If you have had treatment for alcohol use in the past, and whether it worked

If you're a caregiver

Caring for someone who lives with alcohol use issues comes with its own concerns. They may not be ready to share their experience with you or with any health care professionals. Make sure that you get the information and support you need during their treatment journey.

Ask a care professional about:

- Where to learn more about problems with alcohol use
- How to support someone who has problems with alcohol use
- Supports or resources for caregivers (for example, counselling, support groups, workshops)

We're all waiting in the wings to offer the support.

[The problem is] just getting him to come with us.

CAREGIVER FOR SOMEONE WITH ALCOHOL USE ISSUES





Will I go through withdrawal?

Withdrawal can happen if you have used alcohol for a long time, or if you suddenly stop. Your body can react with symptoms like anxiety and nausea, or even vomiting, tremors, or high blood pressure, but not everyone experiences withdrawal symptoms.

Withdrawal from alcohol is different for everyone. If your symptoms get worse and you need help, go to the hospital for treatment and support.

Your care team should tell you:

- What symptoms might be part of withdrawal
- If you need medication for withdrawal
- About withdrawal management services in your area



See quality statement 5, page 12, for more information on going through withdrawal from alcohol.



How do I know if I should go to the hospital?

If you're having difficulty managing your withdrawal symptoms and aren't sure what to do, you can call Telehealth Ontario. A registered nurse will take your call 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. This service is free and confidential.

- Toll-free: 1-866-797-0000
- Toll-free TTY: 1-866-797-0007

You can also call Connex Ontario, which offers many resources, including withdrawal services.

- 1-866-531-2600



Learn more

The Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction shares:

- [Details about alcohol use disorder, treatment options, and contact information for other organizations that can support you](#)
- [Guidance for people wanting to lower their alcohol consumption](#)

Portico Network offers a [tool kit](#) to help people and their family members take their first steps toward care.

The Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH) offers a digital app called [Saying When](#) to help people track their alcohol consumption



For your reference: the quality standard in brief

Below is a summary of the top ten areas to improve care for people 15 years of age and older with alcohol use issues. To read more, you can [download the quality standard here](#).

Quality Statement 1: Screening

People who present to primary care, the emergency department, mental health and addictions settings, or other appropriate settings are screened for problematic alcohol use and alcohol use disorder using a validated tool.

Quality Statement 2: Brief Intervention

People who screen positive for problematic alcohol use are offered a brief intervention.

Quality Statement 3: Comprehensive Assessment

People who may have alcohol use disorder are offered a comprehensive assessment that informs their care plan.

Quality Statement 4: Care Plan

People with alcohol use disorder have an individualized care plan developed in collaboration with their health care professional that includes appropriate services and treatment goals. Care is seamlessly integrated, interprofessional, and provided in primary care or in collaboration with primary care.

Quality Statement 5: Treatment of Alcohol Withdrawal Symptoms

People with alcohol use disorder who have withdrawal symptoms are offered assessment, treatment, and support tailored to the severity of their symptoms.

Quality Statement 6: Information and Education

People with alcohol use disorder and their caregivers are offered information, education, and support appropriate for their needs and preferences.

Continued from the previous page

Quality Statement 7: Psychological and Social Interventions

People with alcohol use disorder are offered information on psychological and social interventions that address their needs and preferences.

Quality Statement 8: Medications to Reduce Alcohol Cravings or Consumption

People with alcohol use disorder have timely access to medications that reduce alcohol cravings or consumption based on their needs and preferences.

Quality Statement 9: Concurrent Mental Health and Substance Use Disorders and Comorbid Physical Health Disorders

People with alcohol use disorder who also have a mental health disorder, physical health disorder, or another substance use disorder are offered treatment for their concurrent and comorbid disorders.

Quality Statement 10: Monitoring, Support, and Follow-Up

People with alcohol use disorder are offered ongoing follow-up with their health care professional on a regular basis to monitor treatment and response.

What's next?

Remember, everybody is different.

The support you need and the care plan you develop with your care professionals will be unique to you.

This conversation guide is only a starting point.

You may have other topics you want to cover with your care professionals. It's important to speak to them about any other questions or concerns..

Need more information?

If you have any questions or feedback about this guide, please contact us at qualitystandards@ontariohealth.ca or 1-866-623-6868.

For more reading on problematic alcohol use and alcohol use disorder, read the quality standard at hqontario.ca/qualitystandards