

Too Much of a Supposedly Good Thing

When recreational alcohol and cannabis use turns problematic

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We are creatures of habits, some good, some inconsequential, and some potentially detrimental. When it comes to widespread habitual recreational use of alcohol and cannabis, many of us are understandably confused about whether or not we should be concerned about our own usage or the usage of someone we care about. Just how much is too much? And how do we know when casual usage has crossed the line. Let's talk about how to identify whether your usage has become problematic.

They are easily accessed mind-altering habit-forming substances used to relax, soothe, or numb uncomfortable feelings or states of mind, like anxiety, stress, and low moods. They take the edge off a bad day, a trying situation, or troubling news. Both are perfectly legal in Canada. And most of us, even if we have never tried alcohol and cannabis, know many people who use these substances regularly.

Those who use alcohol or cannabis recreationally are familiar with their pleasant side effects but tend not to look too deeply at the downside of usage. But both alcohol and cannabis are associated with serious and harmful side effects and symptoms and — each in their own way — leave users vulnerable to dependence.

At the height of COVID lockdowns, when most retail stores were not able to remain open, liquor and cannabis retailers, like grocery stores and pharmacies that sold essential goods, remained fully open to in-person shopping. Even in the coldest months of winter, while the purchase of warm winter clothing was restricted to online shopping, regulators remained steadfast in their choice to maintain convenient access to liquor and cannabis. This rather sobering scenario understandably sets the stage for confusion about whether or not we should be concerned about our use of these legal substances.

How harmful can it be

Just because alcohol and cannabis are legal and have been used recreationally for thousands of years does not mean they are risk-free. Alcohol is well known to be linked to heart disease, stroke, liver disease, numerous cancers, mental health issues, including depression and anxiety, and a range of social issues. Cannabis, while increasingly used by medical professionals for nausea, pain management, anxiety, sleep disorders, and other medical conditions, can have a detrimental effect on mental health, cause damage to the lungs, lower the immune response in some users, and — after chronic, long-term use — result in cyclic vomiting syndrome. There is also research underway to determine the link between increased heart attacks in younger people and other specific groups diagnosed with Cannabis Use Disorder.

Impaired driving due to both alcohol and cannabis is the number one criminal cause of death in Canada. Impaired driving is a serious crime with potentially significant and life-altering consequences.

A few definitions

Alcohol is a toxic carcinogen present in varying percentages in wine, beer, and a wide variety of beverages. *Cannabis* is a psychoactive drug derived from the cannabis plant. *Addiction* can be defined as any behavior or use of any substance to provide temporary relief from uncomfortable emotions

that negatively impact the life of the user... and despite negative consequences, the user continues their use or behavior. With these definitions in mind, let's look at how much is too much, and when casual, recreational usage has crossed the line and become something problematic and concerning.

A new framework

With its criteria for Alcohol Use Disorder and Cannabis Use Disorder, the DSM-5 (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 5th Edition) provides a helpful framework for determining whether or not the use of alcohol and cannabis among users is problematic, and if so, whether a usage disorder is mild, moderate or severe. (While identifying cannabis as a potentially addictive substance may rattle long-held beliefs that it is a harmless and non-addictive substance, through the lens of its ability to provide temporary relief and its potential to interfere with or negatively impact the life of the user, it falls squarely within the definition of an addictive substance.)

How much is too much

Back to the question of how much is too much. General guidelines on safe alcohol use vary and indicate that more than seven drinks per week for women and 14 for men is excessive. But these guidelines are generic and of limited use. Many cannabis manufacturers recommend not exceeding 40 mg per day of consumption. But, since there are many variables when it comes to potency, including THC levels and methods of consumption, the question of safe daily or weekly usage is far more complex and difficult to pinpoint.

The question of how much is too much is more clearly addressed in the definition of addiction earlier in the article. If you're wondering whether you are drinking or using too much alcohol or cannabis, the questions you need to ask yourself are whether your usage is negatively impacting any aspect of your life, and if so, how you can reduce or stop using altogether.

If you are concerned

It is important to be honest with yourself when answering these questions if you are concerned about your usage of alcohol or cannabis. Your answers will provide you with a way forward that could positively impact the quality of your life for years to come. If you conclude that your usage has become problematic, and you can decrease your level of consumption or quit without assistance, you should. If you cannot reduce or stop usage on your own, it is time to bring in outside resources to help.

When recreational use becomes problematic

If your recreational use of either substance has become more problematic, there are many professional resources, treatments, and supports available to address potential use disorders and support your recovery and long-term health.

We are here to live our best life, free from dependence on substances to numb our uncomfortable feelings and anxieties. Addressing our issues and vulnerabilities and prioritizing self-care are key to living life as our highest and best selves.

How much is too much

If you are concerned about your use of alcohol and cannabis:

- **Learn** more about the potential risks of alcohol and cannabis
- **Ask yourself** whether your use has negatively impacted any area of your life
- **Decrease** your consumption or quit on your own, if possible
- **Seek** professional help and support if you need it

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About the author

Dr. Monica Vermani is a Clinical Psychologist specializing in treating trauma, stress and mood & anxiety disorders, and the founder of Start Living Corporate Wellness. She is a well-known speaker, columnist and advocate in the field of mental health and wellness. Her new book, A Deeper Wellness, is now available for purchase at <https://www.book.a deeperwellness.com>, and her in-depth online self-help program, A Deeper Wellness, offers powerful mental health guidance, life skills, knowledge and healing, anywhere, anytime. <https://www.a deeperwellness.com/> <https://www.drmonicavermani.com/>



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