

## **Update on the Health Impacts of Alcohol Consumption**

**Date:** March 25, 2019

**To:** Board of Health

**From:** Medical Officer of Health

**Wards:** All

### **SUMMARY**

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Alcohol consumption remains a leading risk factor for acute harms and chronic disease in Canada. Though the proportion of Ontario adults consuming alcohol has remained stable over the past two decades, the amount of alcohol consumed per person has increased significantly. In particular, average weekly consumption among women has increased by 90% between 1996 and 2017. Serious concerns related to this increase and to the social acceptance of alcohol consumption were raised by Canada's Chief Public Health Officer in the 2018 Report on the State of Public Health in Canada.

An emerging issue is the increase in access to alcohol that started in 2014. Evidence has shown that increasing the availability of alcohol (for example, adding more access points, extending the hours of sale and service, or lowering purchase price), is associated with increased alcohol consumption and alcohol-related health and social harms.

This report provides an update on the health impacts of alcohol consumption, describes recent changes to where and how alcohol is accessed, and presents evidence on mitigation measures. The evidence presented reaffirms previously adopted Board of Health recommendations for the Government of Ontario to proactively balance the provision of alcohol with the need to mitigate health and social harms.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

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The Medical Officer of Health recommends that:

1. The Board of Health, in recognition of the strong and growing evidence that increasing access to alcohol is associated with health and social harms, reaffirms its previous recommendations, including the development of a provincial alcohol strategy to mitigate alcohol related harms in Ontario.
2. The Board of Health forward this report to the Ontario Chief Medical Officer of Health, Association of Local Public Health Agencies, Council of Ontario Medical Officers of Health, Centre for Addiction and Mental Health, Ontario Public Health

Association, the Alcohol and Gaming Commission of Ontario, and Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care, Ministry of Finance, Ministry of the Attorney General, and the Ministry of Community Safety and Correctional Services.

## **FINANCIAL IMPACT**

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There is no financial impact associated with this report.

## **DECISION HISTORY**

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At its meeting on February 26, 2019, City Council adopted a member motion requesting provincial regulatory changes to allow liquor sales license holders to sell and serve alcohol starting at 9:00 a.m. on Saturdays and Sundays.

<http://app.toronto.ca/tmmis/viewAgendaItemHistory.do?item=2019.MM3.6>

At its June 7, 2011 meeting, the Board of Health adopted recommendations in a report from the Medical Officer of Health to take action on alcohol policy, including urging the federal and provincial governments to: maintain regulatory controls on alcohol, align the price of alcohol with cost of living increases, update advertising regulations and develop a provincial alcohol strategy.

<http://app.toronto.ca/tmmis/viewAgendaItemHistory.do?item=2011.HL5.3>

## **COMMENTS**

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This report provides a high-level summary of the health impacts of alcohol consumption, describes recent changes to where and how alcohol is accessed in Ontario, and presents evidence on mitigation measures. Implications of this evidence are discussed and recommended actions to mitigate the increase in access to alcohol are presented.

### *Health impacts of alcohol consumption*

Alcohol is a depressant drug that affects thinking, behaviour, and other physiological functions.<sup>1</sup> Alcohol consumption remains a leading risk factor for acute harms (e.g. violence, injury, suicide, poisoning) and chronic diseases such as alcoholic liver disease and cancer, as well as fetal alcohol spectrum disorder.<sup>2-4</sup>

Approximately 4-in-5 Ontario adults have consumed alcohol in the past year and drinking trends in Toronto are similar.<sup>5</sup> Although this proportion has remained relatively stable over the past two decades, the average weekly number of drinks consumed by those who drink alcohol increased from 3.3 in 1996 to 4.9 drinks per week in 2017. This increase is particularly pronounced among women—increasing from 1.9 to 3.6 drinks per week between 1996 and 2017 (approximately a 90% increase).<sup>5</sup> Serious concerns related to this increase and to the social acceptance of alcohol consumption were raised by Canada's Chief Public Health Officer in the 2018 Report on the State of Public Health

in Canada. In addition, since 2001, alcohol-related deaths in Canada have increased by 5% for men, but women's alcohol-related deaths have increased substantially, by 26%.<sup>6</sup> There are now more hospitalisations due to alcohol than heart attacks in Canada (77,000 vs 75,000 in 2015/16).<sup>4</sup>

Alcohol consumption also has significant related economic costs, eclipsing the amount due to tobacco, cannabis, and opioids. In 2014, it was estimated that between \$1.5 and \$1.3 billion was spent on alcohol-related healthcare and criminal justice issues, respectively in Ontario.<sup>7</sup>

### *Recent changes to increase alcohol access and health impacts*

Access to alcohol in Ontario has increased over the past five years. Wine and cider are now sold at local farmers' markets, alcohol (beer, cider, wine) is sold in over 350 grocery stores, and the Liquor Control Board of Ontario continues to enhance its online retail presence. Recently, the minimum price of beer (below 5.6% ABV) was lowered to \$1.00 and permissible retail sales hours were expanded to 9:00 a.m. to 11:00 p.m. on Sundays (from 11 a.m. to 6 p.m.).

The Government of Ontario is currently considering further alcohol retail expansion, beginning with convenience and big box stores.<sup>8</sup> The Medical Officer of Health gave input from a health perspective to a provincial roundtable consultation on this issue (hosted by the Ministry of Finance) where she emphasized the importance of considering the public health impacts in determining where and how alcohol is sold.<sup>9</sup> As well, evidence has shown that increasing the availability of alcohol (for example, adding more access points, extending the hours of sale and service, or lowering purchase price), is associated with increased alcohol consumption and alcohol-related health and social harms.

### *Measures to reduce the harms of alcohol consumption*

Evidence indicates that government policy strategies such as socially responsible pricing of alcoholic beverages, limits on the number of retail outlets, hours of sale and service, and marketing controls can mitigate the harms from alcohol consumption.<sup>10</sup> A recent review and rating of provincial and territorial alcohol policies found that all Canadian jurisdictions failed to adequately implement the range of policies proven to effectively reduce alcohol-related harms.<sup>11</sup> In Ontario alcohol policy implementation has not progressed since 2012 and is well below the ideal for reducing alcohol-related harms. Notably, Ontario ranked poorly for not having a comprehensive and coordinated alcohol strategy.<sup>11</sup>

The Board of Health has advocated for a comprehensive provincial alcohol strategy for many years. A comprehensive alcohol strategy based on the four components of prevention, harm reduction, treatment and enforcement would provide an overarching framework for policy, program and funding decision-making at a provincial level.

## Implications and recommended action

Given the increase in consumption and alcohol-related deaths, as well as the lack of a provincial strategy, further increasing alcohol access will predictably increase the risk of alcohol-related health and social harms, economic costs, and public safety impacts.

The Medical Officer of Health recommends that the Board of Health reaffirm the 2011 report recommendations including the request for the Government of Ontario to develop a provincial alcohol strategy to address the health and social harms of alcohol consumption. The strategy would provide a comprehensive framework for mitigating the risks from alcohol by applying measures recommended by the World Health Organization.<sup>12</sup>

In addition, TPH will continue to monitor the health and social impacts to the City of Toronto with City partners including Toronto Police Services, Toronto Paramedic Services, Municipal Licensing and Standards, Park, Forestry and Recreation, and Economic Development and Culture.

### CONTACT

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### SIGNATURE

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Dr. Eileen de Villa  
Medical Officer of Health

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