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Insights on Canadian Society

Changes in alcohol consumption from 2015 to 2024

by Eva Fernandes, Yu Lung, Mihojana Jhumi and Ellen Stephenson

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INSIGHTS ON CANADIAN SOCIETY



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Overview of the study

Data from the Canadian Community Health Survey and the Canadian Health Survey on Children and Youth were used to highlight how drinking behaviours in Canada have changed since 2015.

- The proportion of Canadians aged 12 and older who have not had an alcoholic drink in the past 12 months increased from 2015 (23%) to 2024 (29%).
- Among adults who are drinking, there is a trend towards drinking less often, with the proportion of adult drinkers reporting that they drink alcohol

less than once a month increasing from 20% in 2015 to 27% in 2024.

- Although heavy drinking declined among young adults aged 18 to 34 during the COVID-19 pandemic, the proportion of regular drinkers in this age group who are drinking heavily has returned to pre-pandemic levels.

SPECIAL EDITION ISSUE OF INSIGHTS ON CANADIAN SOCIETY

The special edition issue of *Insights on Canadian Society* expands Statistics Canada's flagship social publication to offer policy-relevant articles united across a common theme, leveraging visuals and accessible multimedia formats. This issue focuses on changes in Canadian society over time, shedding light on where Canada has been—and where it is heading. This article is featured within this issue.

Introduction

Alcohol is one of the most commonly consumed psychoactive substances in Canada,¹ with the average Canadian household spending \$1,185 on alcoholic beverages alone in 2023.² However, in recent years, there has been growing recognition that even low levels of alcohol consumption come with potential health risks, since alcohol is a leading cause of preventable morbidity and mortality.³

While alcohol continues to be widely consumed, several countries are seeing shifts in consumption patterns. For example, in Australia, Ireland and the United Kingdom, it appears that today's generation of young people are not drinking as much as their parents did at a similar age.⁴ There is also research⁵ showing a long-term trend towards less heavy drinking⁶ among Canadian youth. In Canada, heavy drinking among people aged 12 and older declined from 19.2% in 2015 to 15.6% in 2021.⁷

To better understand how alcohol consumption behaviours are changing over time, it is important to look at multiple measures of alcohol consumption, including the prevalence and frequency of alcohol consumption, as well as the amount consumed. This article will use data from the Canadian Community Health Survey and the Canadian Health Survey on Children and Youth to examine trends and changes in alcohol consumption in Canada over the past decade, including the factors that may be driving a decrease in heavy drinking.

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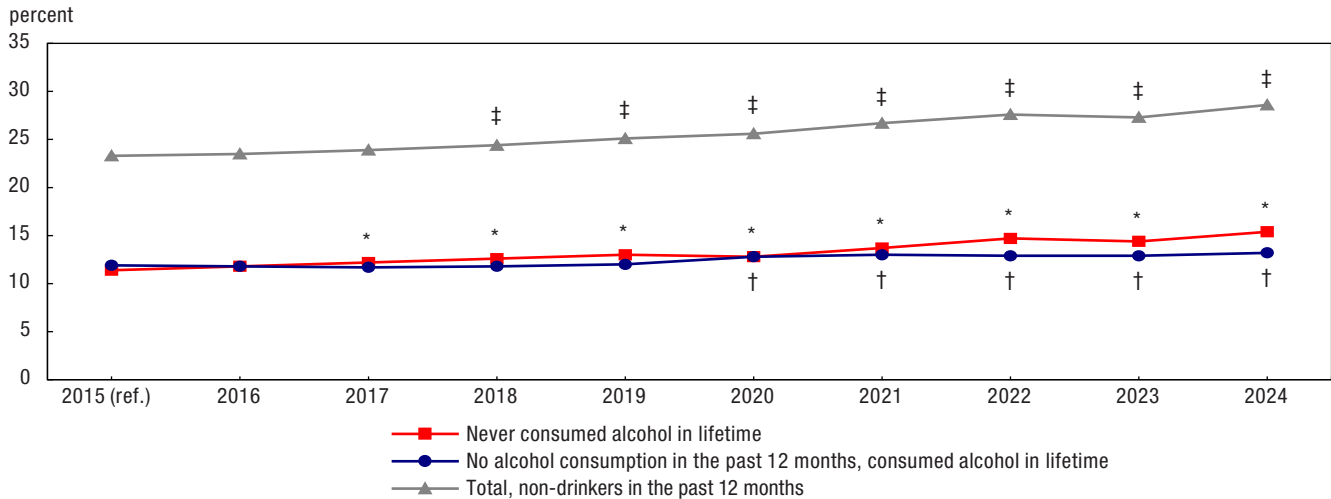
In 2015, 23% of people in Canada aged 12 and older reported that they had not had an alcoholic drink in the past 12 months. By 2024, this proportion had increased to 29%.

More Canadians are reporting that they have not had an alcoholic drink in the past 12 months

The number of current drinkers (people who had at least one alcoholic drink⁸ in the past year) has been declining over time. In 2015, 23% of people in Canada aged 12 and older reported that they had not had an alcoholic drink in the past 12 months. By 2024, this proportion had increased to 29%. This trend was driven by growth in the proportion of people who reported having never had an alcoholic drink in their lifetime (11% in 2015 to 15% in 2024), as well as a slight increase in the number of people who reported that they had not consumed alcohol in the past 12 months (12% in 2015 to 13% in 2024), despite having done so previously (Chart 1).

Chart 1

Percentage of people aged 12 and older who did not drink alcohol in the past 12 months, by lifetime drinking history, 2015 to 2024



* significantly different from reference year (ref.) for "Never consumed alcohol in lifetime" ($p < 0.05$)

† significantly different from reference year (ref.) for "No alcohol consumption in the past 12 months, consumed alcohol in lifetime" ($p < 0.05$)

‡ significantly different from reference year (ref.) for "Total non-drinkers in the past 12 months" ($p < 0.05$)

Notes: "Total, non-drinkers in the past 12 months" is the sum of those who never consumed alcohol in their lifetime and those who have not had an alcoholic drink in the past 12 months but have had an alcoholic drink in their lifetime. Data from two different surveys were pooled before estimating the 2023 and 2024 percentages.

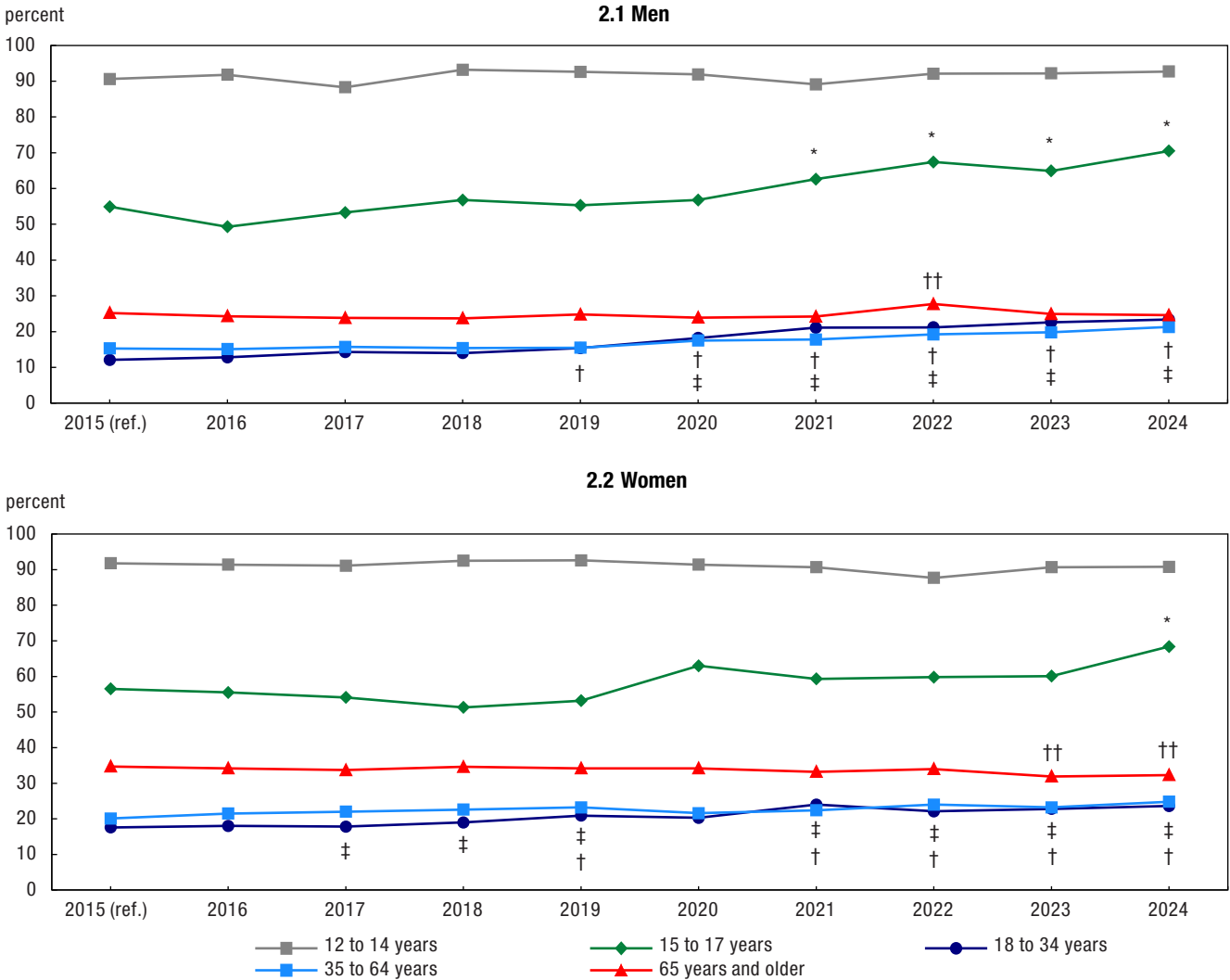
Sources: Statistics Canada, Canadian Community Health Survey, 2015 to 2024; Canadian Health Survey on Children and Youth, 2023 and 2024.

The trend towards less frequent alcohol consumption was strongest among young men aged 15 to 34

Although there was an overall trend towards fewer people consuming alcohol, this change was more pronounced in some age groups compared with others (Chart 2). Some of the largest changes were

observed among men younger than 35. In 2015, just over half (55%) of young men⁹ aged 15 to 17 reported that they had not had an alcoholic drink in the past year. By 2024, this had increased by 16 percentage points to 71%. The proportion of men aged 18 to 34 who reported that they had not had an alcoholic drink in the past year nearly doubled from 12% in 2015 to 23% in 2024.

Chart 2
Percentage of non-drinkers in the past 12 months, by age and sex, 2015 to 2024



* significantly different from reference year (ref.) for people aged 15 to 17 years ($p < 0.05$)
† significantly different from reference year (ref.) for people aged 18 to 34 years ($p < 0.05$)
‡ significantly different from reference year (ref.) for people aged 35 to 64 years ($p < 0.05$)
†† significantly different from reference year (ref.) for people aged 65 years and older ($p < 0.05$)

Sources: Statistics Canada, Canadian Community Health Survey, 2015 to 2024; Canadian Health Survey on Children and Youth, 2023 and 2024.

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In 2015, 80% of adults aged 18 and older who drank alcohol in the past year reported doing so at least once a month. By 2024, this proportion had fallen to 73%.

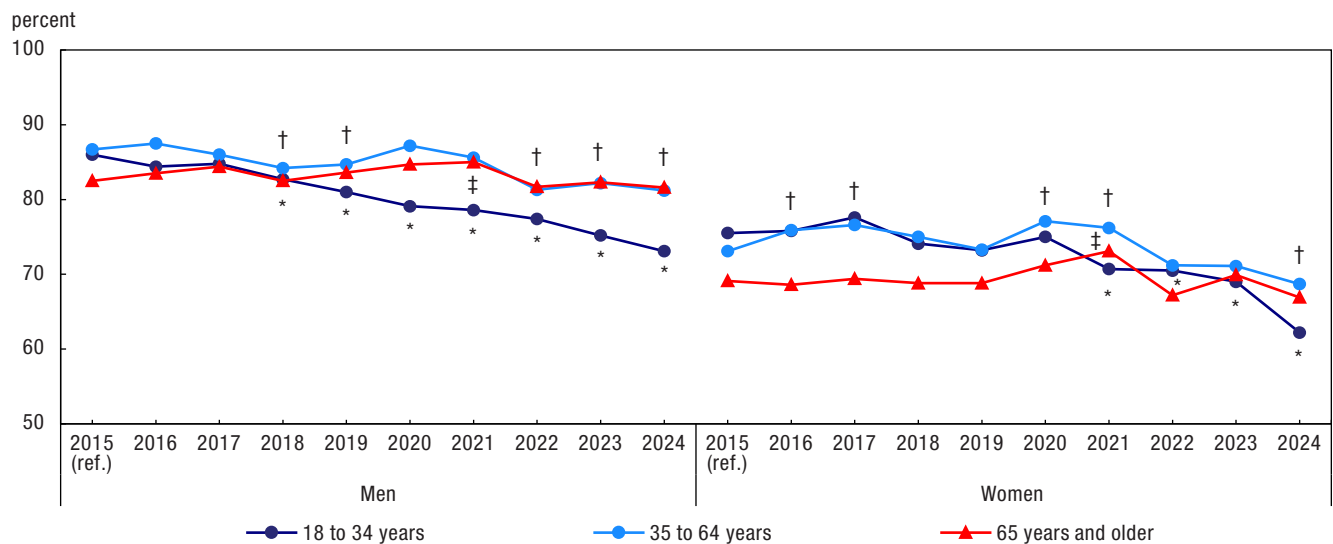
Among current drinkers, there is a trend towards drinking alcohol less often

Some people drink alcohol a couple of times a year, while others report drinking alcohol on a monthly,

weekly or daily basis. Over the past 10 years, the proportion of Canadians who reported drinking regularly (at least once a month) has been declining. In 2015, 80% of adults aged 18 and older who drank alcohol in the past year reported doing so at least once a month. By 2024, this proportion had fallen to 73%. This change occurred primarily among people aged 18 to 34 (Chart 3). In 2015, 86% of male drinkers aged 18 to 34 had a drink at least once a month. By 2024, this had dropped by 13 percentage points to 73%. A similar pattern was observed among women aged 18 to 34, with 76% of drinkers in 2015 reporting that they had an alcoholic drink at least once a month, dropping to 62% in 2024.

Chart 3

Percentage of drinkers in the past 12 months who drank alcohol at least once a month, by age and sex, 2015 to 2024



* significantly different from reference year for people aged 18 to 34 years ($p < 0.05$)

† significantly different from reference year for people aged 35 to 64 years ($p < 0.05$)

‡ significantly different from reference year for people aged 65 years and older ($p < 0.05$)

Source: Statistics Canada, Canadian Community Health Survey, 2015 to 2024.

Heavy drinking declined among young adults during the COVID-19 pandemic, but has recently returned to pre-pandemic levels among regular drinkers

How often someone drinks alcohol is only part of the story. It is also important to consider how much alcohol is consumed on these occasions. Some people might have one drink every day but never have four or five drinks on one occasion. Other people might drink less often, but when they do consume alcohol, they have at least four or five drinks on that one occasion.

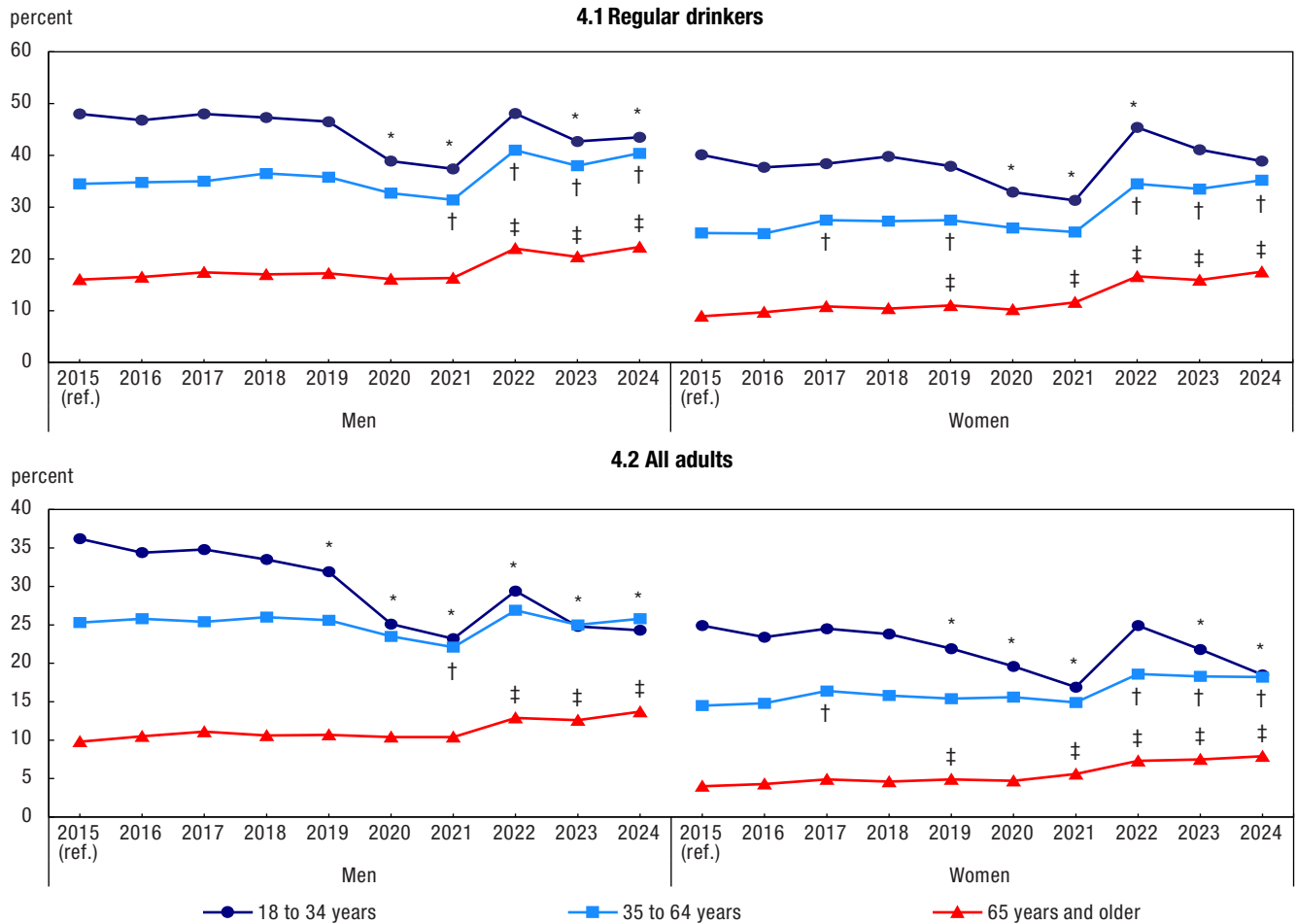
The concept of heavy drinking is defined based on how many alcoholic drinks are consumed within a single occasion (four or more for women and five or more for men), as well as how often these occasions occur (at least once a month in the past 12 months). Therefore, heavy drinkers are a subset of regular drinkers.

During the pandemic, when many bars and restaurants were closed and opportunities to socialize

were limited, the proportion of regular drinkers aged 18 to 34 who reported engaging in heavy drinking dropped significantly. Among men aged 18 to 34, the proportion went from 48% in 2015 to 39% in 2020 and 37% in 2021. For women aged 18 to 34, the proportion went from 40% in 2015 to 33% in 2020 and 31% in 2021 (Chart 4.1). The proportion of regular drinkers in this age group who were heavy drinkers returned to pre-pandemic levels in 2022 for men and in 2023 for women.

This return to pre-pandemic levels of heavy drinking is evident only when the analysis of drinking behaviours is limited to regular drinkers. The traditional approach that measures the percentage of all Canadians who are classified as heavy drinkers (Chart 4.2) would suggest that heavy drinking among men aged 18 to 34 decreased from 36% in 2015 to 24% in 2024. This study shows that this decrease in heavy drinking among all Canadians is coming primarily from a reduction in the number of people who drink alcohol (Chart 2), as well as less regular drinking among those who do drink (Chart 3), rather than from a reduction in heavy consumption among those who drink regularly (Chart 4.1).

Chart 4
Heavy drinking, by age and sex, 2015 to 2024



* significantly different from reference year (ref.) for people aged 18 to 34 years ($p < 0.05$)
† significantly different from reference year (ref.) for people aged 35 to 64 years ($p < 0.05$)
‡ significantly different from reference year (ref.) for people aged 65 years and older ($p < 0.05$)
Source: Statistics Canada, Canadian Community Health Survey, 2015 to 2024.

Conclusion

Across several different indicators, this study shows that more Canadians are abstaining from drinking alcohol. Some people are choosing not to drink at all, while others are drinking alcohol less often. There are many possible explanations for this trend. It may reflect a change in attitudes and social norms around drinking, with greater awareness of the health effects of drinking and less social pressure to drink alcohol, especially for young people.¹⁰ It is also possible that the increased availability of recreational cannabis products¹¹ has led some people to favour cannabis products over alcohol.¹² Demographic shifts in the Canadian population could also impact these trends. The increased ethnocultural diversity of the population could mean that different

cultural norms around alcohol consumption are becoming more prevalent in Canada.¹³ For example, some people may choose to abstain from alcohol consumption for cultural or religious reasons.

Although there were declines in heavy drinking among young adults during the pandemic, these do not appear to be sustained changes in behaviour among regular drinkers. As more post-pandemic data become available, it will be interesting to see whether new trends emerge.

Eva Fernandes, Yu Lung and Mihojana Jhumi were analysts with the Centre for Population Health Data at Statistics Canada. **Ellen Stephenson** is a unit head with the Centre for Population Health Data at Statistics Canada.

Data sources, methods and definitions

The [Canadian Community Health Survey \(CCHS\)](#) collected data from people aged 12 years and older annually from 2015 to 2022. In 2023, the CCHS was changed to cover only adults aged 18 years and older, and the [Canadian Health Survey on Children and Youth \(CHSCY\)](#) collected annual health indicators for youth aged 12 to 17.

The CCHS and the CHSCY are nationally representative cross-sectional surveys that cover the Canadian household population of a specific year, excluding people living on reserves and other Indigenous settlements, full-time members of the Canadian Forces, institutionalized populations, and residents of certain remote regions.

From 2022 onwards, data were collected via an online questionnaire that was completed by the respondent

or via a telephone interview. Prior to 2022, data were collected via in-person or telephone interviews.

For each year, survey and bootstrap weights were used to estimate percentages and their corresponding 95% confidence intervals for each measure of alcohol consumption. Z-tests were used to compare proportions in a given year relative to the baseline (2015). A two-tailed p-value below 0.05 was considered statistically significant.

In 2019, the CCHS and CHSCY began asking about both sex and gender. Sex refers to the sex assigned at birth, and gender refers to an individual's personal and social identity. The analysis presented here was based on sex at birth. The terms "men" and "women" are used instead of "males" and "females" throughout this article for ease of reading.

Notes

1. Health Canada, 2024.
2. Statistics Canada, 2025.
3. Paradis et al., 2023; World Health Organization, 2024.
4. Vashishtha et al., 2021; Dunphy et al., 2025.
5. Garriguet, 2021.
6. Heavy drinking is defined as having four or more drinks on one occasion for women and five or more drinks on one occasion for men at least once a month in the past 12 months.
7. Health Statistics Branch, 2023.
8. A standard alcoholic drink corresponds to a certain amount of pure alcohol and is equivalent to 341 millilitres (12 ounces) of 5% alcohol beer, cooler, cider or ready-to-drink beverage; 142 millilitres (5 ounces) of 12% alcohol wine; or 43 millilitres (1.5 ounces) of 40% alcohol spirits (whisky, vodka, gin, etc.).
9. The terms “men” and “women” are used throughout this article for ease of reading. See the Data sources, methods and definitions box for more details.
10. MacLean et al., 2021.
11. Statistics Canada, 2023.
12. Mital et al., 2024.
13. Statistics Canada, 2024; Ru and Li, 2021.

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