Risky Drinking: A Significant Public Health Problem

- Almost four percent of adults are alcohol dependent (alcoholic). Another 25% are not dependent but drink in ways that put themselves and others at risk of harm.\(^{1,2}\)

- Everyone who engages in risky drinking is drinking too much, even if they have not yet begun to experience harm. For some people, any drinking at all is risky.\(^{3}\)

- One common type of risky drinking is binge drinking—when women consume 4 or more drinks or men consume 5 or more drinks on a single occasion. More than 38 million American adults binge drink an average of 4 times a month. Moreover, on average they drink 8 drinks per occasion.\(^{4}\)

- Risky drinking causes more than 80,000 deaths each year.\(^{4}\)

What are the health and social effects of risky drinking?

Drinking too much on a single occasion can result in intoxication and the immediate risks listed below. Drinking too much over a longer period of time injures cells in tissues throughout the body and can result in the long-term risks listed below. Further, risky drinking affects more than the drinker; it is associated with intimate partner violence, child abuse, crime, and is the largest single cause of lost productivity in the workplace.

**IMMEDIATE RISKS**
- motor vehicle crashes
- pedestrian injuries
- drowning
- falls
- intimate partner violence
- depressed mood
- homicide & suicide
- unintended firearm injuries
- alcohol poisoning
- unprotected sex (leading to sexually transmitted diseases and unintended pregnancy)
- assaults and sexual assaults
- child abuse and neglect
- property crimes
- fires

**LONG-TERM RISKS**
- chronic depression
- neurologic damage
- fetal alcohol spectrum disorders (which include physical, behavioral, and learning disabilities)
- gastric distress
- hypertension
- cardiovascular disease
- permanent liver damage
- cancer
- pancreatitis
- diabetes
- alcoholism

What is the cost of risky drinking?

Each year, risky drinking in the U.S. costs $223.5 billion. That’s more than smoking ($193 billion) or physical inactivity ($150 billion). The costs of risky drinking cut across many aspects of the U.S. economy.

**Costs of Risky Drinking\(^{5}\)**

- Fire and Property Damage: $2,577,000,000
- Fetal Alcohol Syndrome: $4,961,000,000
- Motor Vehicle Crashes: $13,718,000,000
- Criminal Justice: $20,973,000,000
- Health Care: $22,018,000,000
- Lost Productivity: $159,232,000,000
What’s a Standard Drink?*

A standard drink in the United States is any drink that contains about 14 grams of pure alcohol (about 0.6 fluid ounces or 1.2 tablespoons). Below are U.S. standard drink equivalents. These are approximate, since different brands and types of beverages vary in their actual alcohol content.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>12 oz.</th>
<th>8.5 oz</th>
<th>5 oz.</th>
<th>3.5 oz.</th>
<th>2.5 oz.</th>
<th>1.5 oz.</th>
<th>1.5 oz.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>of beer or cooler</td>
<td>of malt liquor</td>
<td>of table wine</td>
<td>of fortified wine</td>
<td>of cordial, liqueur, or aperitif</td>
<td>of brandy</td>
<td>of spirits</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 oz.</td>
<td>8-9 oz.</td>
<td>5 oz.</td>
<td>3-4 oz.</td>
<td>2-3 oz.</td>
<td>1.5 oz.</td>
<td>1.5 oz.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.5 oz. shown in a 12-oz. glass that, if full, would hold about 1.5 standard drinks of malt liquor</td>
<td>5 oz. shown in a 12-oz. glass that, if full, would hold about 1.5 standard drinks of wine</td>
<td>such as sherry or port 3.5 oz. shown</td>
<td>2.5 oz. shown</td>
<td>a single jigger</td>
<td>a single jigger of 80-proof gin, vodka, whiskey, etc.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Shown straight and in a highball glass with ice to show level before adding mixer*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Many people don't know what counts as a standard drink and so they don't realize how many standard drinks are in the containers in which these drinks are often sold. Some examples:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>For beer the approximate number of standard drinks in</th>
<th>For malt liquor the approximate number of standard drinks in</th>
<th>For table wine the approximate number of standard drinks in</th>
<th>For 80-proof spirits or “hard liquor” the approximate number of standard drinks in</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>12 oz. = 1</td>
<td>12 oz. = 1.5</td>
<td>a standard 750 mL (25 oz.) bottle = 5</td>
<td>a mixed drink = 1 or more*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16 oz. = 1.3</td>
<td>16 oz. = 2</td>
<td></td>
<td>a pint (16 oz.) = 11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22 oz. = 2</td>
<td>22 oz. = 2.5</td>
<td></td>
<td>a fifth (25 oz.) = 17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40 oz. = 3.3</td>
<td>40 oz. = 4.5</td>
<td></td>
<td>1.75 L (59 oz.) = 39</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: It can be difficult to estimate the number of standard drinks in a single mixed drink made with hard liquor. Depending on factors such as the type of spirits and the recipe, a mixed drink can contain from one to three or more standard drinks.