

Binge drinking in Ontario colleges, universities: A crisis on campus



Students know the risks, but binge drinking is still a part of university life. At Ollie's, a sign reads "Stay thirsty." [Photo by Addison Fallis]

For Alex Dery, a second-year student at Carleton University, drinking is a part of campus life.

"It keeps you going, and it's a fun time," he said. Dery, who is in civil engineering at Carleton University, often drinks on weekends with his friends. Despite the times he has woken up with headaches and nausea, he admits the cycle repeats itself most weekends.

"On New Year's, I went out with my friends, I drank a lot more than four beers, and the next day I went to the gym, and it was not good."

Drinking is a routine part of social life, he said – something that feels almost unavoidable in the university environment – something that can have a positive impact on his academic performance.

“Life is all about balance. You can’t always be doing school,” he said.

Despite being aware of the risks associated with drinking, Dery said he finds it difficult to drink less when alcohol is constantly present at gatherings.

“I have felt very pressured to drink, and I think that’s normal, honestly,” he said. “When I hang out with my friends and I get there late, they peer pressure me to get as drunk as they are.”

Experts such as doctors and addiction counselors say excessive alcohol use may have long-term consequences for one’s physical, emotional and academic well-being.



Ollie's is a student-run campus bar at Carleton University. [Photo by Addison Fallis]

How alcohol affects the brain and the body

Dr. Patricia Lovett explains the negative effects of binge drinking.

“Binge drinking in males is usually defined as five or more alcoholic beverages in one day or one evening [...], for females, it’s four or more,” she said in an interview on Feb. 16. “Another definition of binge drinking is drinking such a large quantity within a two-hour period that it brings up the blood-alcohol levels to a level of 0.08 grams per decilitre, or higher.”

According to Dr. Lovett, drinking a lot of alcohol can be harmful to the brain. Lovett said, “Heavy binge drinking throughout university probably has a very negative effect on overall performance, cognitively [...] and reduces processing speeds.”

Alcohol can also negatively impact the internal organs. The liver and the stomach are the most significantly impacted by excessive alcohol consumption, while other affected areas are frequently overlooked. “Alcohol is toxic to our bone marrow, so people who drink a fair bit [...] typically have macrocytosis, which means enlarged red blood cells,” she said.

According to the Cleveland [Clinic](#), macrocytosis is typically not indicative of a severe condition; however, it may result in more serious health complications if left untreated.

Dr. Lovett added that because alcohol disrupts deep REM sleep – potentially leading to long-term memory problems and other cognitive impairments, binge drinking is associated with increased rates of anxiety, depression and sleep difficulties.

“There’s at least 50 per cent of alcoholics that it [runs] in the family,” she said. “So if they start young, they’re likely to have a much longer history of heavy alcohol use and struggles with dependency on alcohol.”



Binge drinking does not necessarily lead to alcoholism but could be a risk factor. [Photo by Julia Nastogadka, Unsplash, July 30, 2017]

The psychology behind binge drinking

Karina Praught is an addictions counsellor working for the Royal Ottawa Health Care Group, as well as an in-client service home for a recovery centre in Carlsbad Springs. She has been working in the field since September 2024.

“Binge drinking is not a gateway to alcoholism; it creates a straighter path to that if other factors are at play,” she said in an interview on March 2. Stress and anxiety can be factors that contribute to binge drinking – academic and personal stress, kids being away from home, and navigating a new lifestyle and pressures that come with it.

Depending on the user’s tolerance and usage history, alcohol has varying effects on the brain. Praught points out the differences between alcoholism and binge drinking. According to her, people who suffer from alcoholism have used it for such a long period of time, that their body no longer has the same threshold. For someone who is binge drinking, the tolerance level of their body doesn’t necessarily change, so they continue to go out, weekly or biweekly, and drink to the point of vomiting and other symptoms of intoxication. On the other hand, people who suffer from alcohol dependency have changed their tolerance threshold altogether.

“When not drinking for a few days, they will notice withdrawal symptoms, which can be deadly to someone with an alcohol dependence,” Praught said.

Praught added that social and academic demands are frequently connected to binge drinking. “Students who are experiencing depression may use alcohol as a means of self-medicating,” she said. “From a neurological standpoint and a pharmacological standpoint, the way it reacts on the brain is actually a depressor.”

The significance of prevention and accessibility

Praught pointed out that access to alcohol is one of the main causes of excessive drinking among students. While the legal drinking age in neighbouring Quebec is 18, it is 19 in Ontario. Alcohol is more easily accessible to students in border cities at an earlier age. Drinking culture is further normalized by the availability of alcohol in corner stores and gas stations.

“It’s quite possible that a lot of students who are coming to university for the first time haven’t necessarily had those conversations of substance use at home,” she said. “Parents might not want to talk about it in hopes that it won’t happen.”

Student perspectives: The reality of alcohol consumption



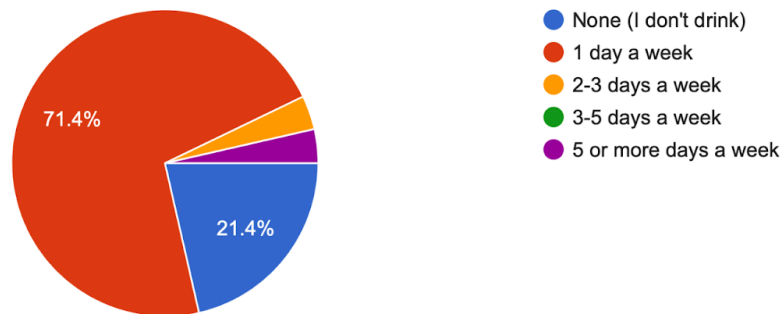
In a short online survey this winter, some students said they spent as much as \$40 on alcohol in one night out. [Photo by Addison Fallis]

I shared a Google form on social media and with acquaintances to survey about 28 post-secondary students about their alcohol use. The **study** revealed differing drinking patterns and their consequences. Some students said they routinely drink, while others said they abstain entirely.

The majority of students who took part said they drink once a week, and most people said they drink between two and five drinks on a typical night out.

On average, how many days a week do you drink alcohol?

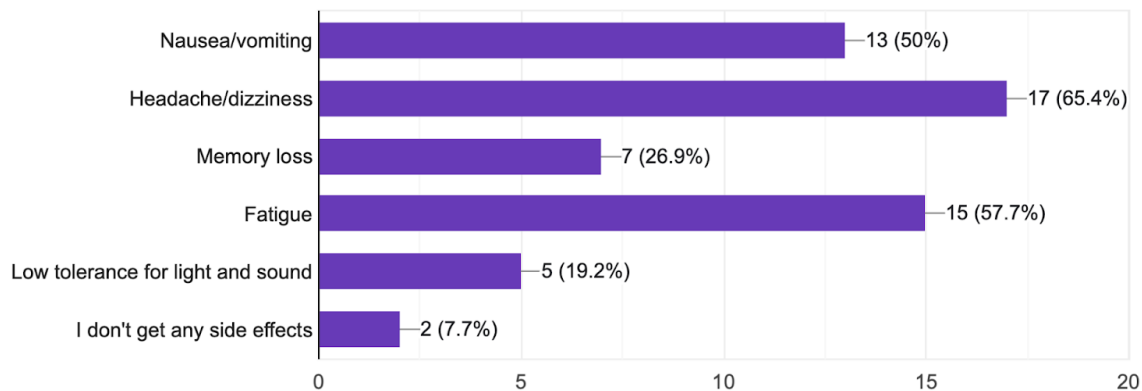
28 responses



When asked if they experience negative after-effects from drinking, participants reported a mix of nausea, vomiting, headaches, dizziness, memory loss, and fatigue, though a few students reported no negative side effects.

Do you experience side-effects after a night of excessive drinking? If so, which ones?

26 responses



Contrasting perspectives

Gabriella Caceros is a second-year student studying astrophysics at the University of Waterloo who abstains from drinking.

“A night of excessive alcohol consumption in high school taught me the negative side effects of alcohol, and I have since refrained as much as possible,” she said.

While she sometimes feels like drinking is the norm in social settings, Caceros said she believes staying sober has improved her academic focus and mental health.

Jewel Wheeler, who has worked at Ollie's bar at Carleton University for a year and a half, described the bar's approach to responsible service. "When we serve our customers, if someone feels that they have been served to the point of intoxication, we tell each other [...] and they're cut off for the next hour," she said.

Wheeler noted that most students don't overdrink, often coming for a couple of drinks but not to get intoxicated; however, some exceptions exist. "I've had one guy that I've had to cut off three times; he comes in and he orders eight beers in an hour."



Emma McEdwards works at Ollie's bar at Carleton University [Photo by Addison Fallis]

Emma McEdwards, who has worked at Ollie's for three years, shared a concerning incident. A student drank excessively, left, returned, and demanded more alcohol. When she was refused service, the student became upset, and security had to be called.

“Generally, people regulate their drinking, probably because they’re on school campus,” Wheeler said. When asked if students are more aware of binge drinking risks today, she said, “Honestly, I’d say no. Drinking is very normalized in our culture. My mentality when I drink is, [...] I’m drinking to get drunk, and I think most students have that mentality, which is why binge drinking can become a problem.”