

Canada's Guidance on Alcohol and Health

by

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Introduction

This case study is published by the International Plain Language Federation (IPLF) to provide a real-world example of how organizations are implementing the ISO 24495-1 plain language standard.

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The need: simplifying the new guidelines

The Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction (CCSA) was commissioned by Health Canada to update Canada's drinking guidelines. The results of this rigorous scientific work needed to be communicated in a clear and accessible way to all Canadians.

The new guidelines are very different from those published in 2011. In 2011, people were provided with numerical limits for weekly and daily amounts of alcohol use. In comparison, the 2023 guidance recommends people consider reducing their alcohol use. To help them make an informed decision about possible alcohol use reduction, the 2023 guidance presents a continuum of risk according to which:

- 1–2 drinks a week represents a low risk of harm
- 3–6 drinks a week represents a moderate risk of harm, and
- 7 or more drinks a week represents an increasingly high risk of harm.

The guidance also recommends that if you drink more than 2 drinks a week, you must make sure that you don't exceed 2 drinks on any day.

The 2023 guidance recommends that people consider reducing their alcohol use because overwhelming evidence confirms that when it comes to drinking alcohol, less is better.

The objective: developing a visual communication

Our goal was to communicate the new guidelines as clearly and as visually as possible, on a one page infographic. This infographic is intended for the general Canadian population. It is intended for people who are not specialists in public health or epidemiology. Therefore, it was necessary to clearly communicate only information relevant to all groups of people and all types of drinkers.

The approach: using a plain language process

We developed an implementation plan to guide us in creating the one page infographic. The plan set out our plain language process, required resources and timeframe. Our plain language process follows the 4 principles of the ISO standard for plain language.

To create the infographic, we first worked with the project's scientific expert panels to select the right information to communicate to the public. We produced several versions of the infographic before arriving at a balance that was satisfactory to the experts, but most importantly useful to the public. Consultation with members of the target audience, which was central to the project, helped us choose appropriate content.

We consulted with the target audience several times during the process, often informally, as we developed new versions. These consultations resulted in several versions of the text, the graphic, and the illustrations. The table below summarizes these consultations.

Consultation on first version	<p>The first version of the infographic was the subject of a consultation with 30 people. This consultation led to several changes. It became particularly clear that many people had strong beliefs about alcohol. For example, the health benefits of drinking red wine, or that the health effects of alcohol differ by gender.</p> <p>In order for the new guidelines to be understood, it seemed essential to deconstruct this knowledge. Thus, at the beginning of the infographic, we read, "We now know..." and "The science is evolving...". Subsequent consultations showed that these phrases had achieved their goal.</p>
Second informal consultation	<p>After several iterations with the scientific expert panels to ensure the scientific accuracy of the content, we consulted with 5 people to verify how the changes were understood. Some adjustments were made to the text and graphic.</p>

<p>Survey</p>	<p>We asked 3 open-ended questions about the infographic on a survey. The CCSA distributed the survey through their networks.</p> <p>A total of 744 people responded to these questions and commented on either the French or English version of the infographic.</p> <p>This consultation confirmed that overall, even if the new data surprised and sometimes provoked strong reactions, the infographic succeeded in communicating it clearly. Nevertheless, the results of the consultation led to several improvements. The most notable of these regarded the risk continuum graphic: we reversed the presentation of the drinks and added text describing the consequences of drinking. This made the graphic more visual and comprehensive.</p>
<p>Final consultation</p>	<p>After this major consultation, it was essential to consult again to see if the changes made were working. Ten people were consulted: 5 francophones, and 5 anglophones from different regions of Canada. Some minor corrections were made to the text for clarification. This consultation reassured us of the effectiveness of the infographic.</p>

We faced a number of challenges during the project:

Complex information

Communicating about alcohol requires dealing with concepts that many people are not familiar with: risk, probabilities, standard drinks are complex. Communicating these concepts as clearly as possible in a few words was a challenge. Another challenge was to illustrate a risk curve of exponential proportions.

A lot of information to communicate

The new guidelines were developed by CCSA and a group of experts. The experts had more information to communicate than an infographic can contain. They also wanted the infographic to address other alcohol-related topics, such as breastfeeding or drinking and driving.

Bilingual infographic

The infographic needed to be produced in both official languages of Canada. We had found a very eloquent expression in French that, despite our research and efforts, did not translate as effectively into English. Although the text did not have to be literally translated, we had to achieve similar content.

Emotional topic

Alcohol is an emotional topic: we had to find the right tone to make the content informative and engaging without being prescriptive and moralistic.

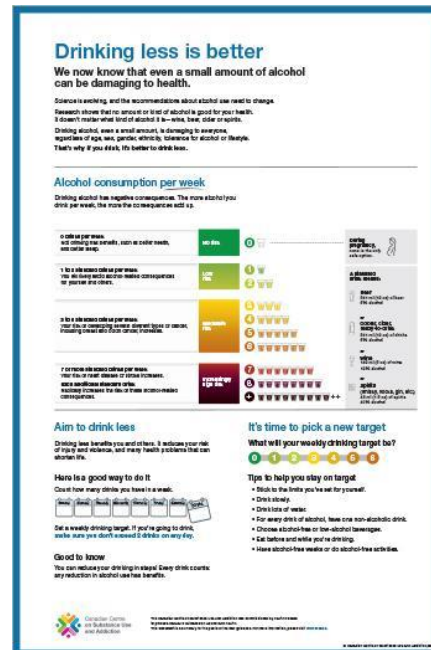
The result: an infographic that illustrates a continuum of risks

We created an infographic with a clear, simple, strong, and well-positioned key message from the start: drinking less is better. The infographic features familiar text accompanied by a graphic illustrating a continuum of risks associated with alcohol-related diseases and harms. The continuum uses colour coding and drinking glasses to show the increase in risk. A section is designed to encourage people to assess their drinking and think about their drinking targets. Finally, tips on how to drink less are offered.

The new guidelines were released in January 2023. They have generated tremendous media coverage in Canada and internationally. The CCSA team has given hundreds of interviews to newspapers, radio, and television.

The infographic has been one of the preferred communication tools in many of the stories to date and is the entry point for quickly understanding the new guidelines published in the detailed report. It has been used to summarize and explain the results of the CCSA's work in plain language. The fact that reporters use the graphic or entire sentences from the infographic shows that the information is being communicated effectively. The infographic can be used in health centres by professionals in discussions with patients. Several people consulted during the process mentioned that the infographic made them think about their alcohol use. This is definitely the most important impact!

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Autrement dit won 3 ClearMark Awards in 2023 for their work on the infographic: infographic category winner; French language winner; and Grand ClearMark Award winner.