

# Low tolerance for the “high alcohol tolerance” myth

*Alcohol impairment is a tricky thing to judge on your own: Many factors contribute to how your body reacts to booze*

In the past few weeks we’ve discussed sharing the road with pedestrians, and the shared responsibility we shoulder when taking to the streets of Manitoba.

Now I’d like to talk to you about another kind of sharing, one that many consider almost a summer ritual: sharing a cold drink or two with friends.

Now, far be it from me to condemn cold beer on a hot day. It’s the cold beer/carburetor combination that I want to bring to your attention. Since roughly 40 per cent of all fatalities, 20 per cent of all injuries and 10 per cent of all vehicle and property damage resulting from vehicle crashes in Manitoba are directly linked to alcohol consumption, I believe it’s worth talking about.

It’s going to take more than one column to properly cover off the issue, so what I’d like to do is save the statistics for another day, and use this column to debunk one of



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many common myths about drinking and driving.

You’ve heard the “high tolerance” argument, I’m sure. It usually goes something like, “I can drink more than the average man/woman and not be over the limit because I have a different (higher, faster, slower) metabolism than they do.”

## **Looks can be deceiving**

Well, it’s true that some people act completely sober, no matter how much they’ve had to drink. But looking sober in no way implies that the person is sober, or is capable of driving, even if he or she says, and honestly believes, they feel fine.

You see, alcohol impairment is a tricky thing to judge on your own. You have to take into account how long you’ve been drinking, what you’ve been drinking, your weight, your gender, what you’ve eaten, what drugs you’ve taken (antihistamines and cold medicines can change how you react to alcohol, and we won’t even get into the effect of ‘recreational’ drugs), even your mood. All of these factors contribute to how your body absorbs and reacts to alcohol; so, two drinks can create a different level of impairment in the same person, depending on which factors are in the mix. And frankly, once you’ve been drinking you are not in the best position to be analyzing these factors.

Take weight, for example. A person with a smaller build may reach a higher Blood Alcohol Level (BAC) with the same number of drinks as a person with a larger build. Now, lest all you “larger

builds” out there think that you can have a couple more than your buddy and still be all right, keep in mind that this biological advantage is gained from muscle weight earned at the gym, not from weight earned from potato chips and dip. Weight due to excess fat doesn’t increase the body’s ability to absorb alcohol.

Generally speaking, women will have a higher BAC level than men will when drinking equal amounts of alcohol. Why? To be honest, science isn’t totally sure, but it is believed that one reason is that women often have more body fat and less water than men of the same weight do.

## **Food won’t keep you sober**

Food counts, too, but not as much as most people think. Eating a high protein, low salt meal prior to having a drink will slightly slow the rate at which alcohol is absorbed into your blood stream, but it won’t guarantee that you stay sober.

Even your mood can affect how booze and your body mix. While depression, anxiety, nervousness and fatigue don’t physiologically change your body’s absorption rate, they do change how you react to alcohol, altering your control and reflexes.

So, next time you’re thinking of having a couple and getting behind the wheel, remember that even one drink can affect judgment and reactions, and that you, yourself, might not be the same “body” you were the last time you drank and stayed below .05.

More next week. In the meantime, stay **RoadWise**.

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