

Diabetes: How Drinking Affects This Disease



People who have diabetes need to be more careful with alcohol. Before you drink, consider a few things: Is your diabetes well-controlled? Do you know how drinking alcohol can affect you? Do you have high blood pressure, nerve damage, or eye problems from your diabetes?

If you are controlling your diabetes and do not have other health issues, it may be okay to have an occasional drink. Learning how alcohol affects your body can help you make the right choices.

How does alcohol affect you?

If you take insulin or pills for diabetes, drinking alcohol may cause low blood sugar. The low blood sugar reaction works like this: Normally, when your blood sugar starts to drop, your liver turns carbohydrate stored in your body into glucose (sugar) and sends it out into your bloodstream. This keeps your blood sugar steady. But when you drink, your liver wants to remove the alcohol as fast as possible. It will not send out more glucose into the blood until it gets rid of the alcohol. So if your blood sugar was already falling when you started drinking,

it can drop even more. This could cause dangerous low blood sugar levels.

You may be able to prevent this by only drinking alcohol with a meal or snack. Never drink on an empty stomach. Having as little as two drinks on an empty stomach could lead to low blood sugar.

Drinking alcohol after you exercise can also cause problems. The exercise itself lowers blood sugar. So if your liver does not send glucose into your blood because of the alcohol, your blood sugar can go even lower.

How much alcohol can you drink?

Work with your doctor to find what is best for you. Make sure you know whether it is safe to drink if you are taking insulin or pills. Remember, **these medicines work to remove the glucose from your blood**. When your liver does not replace the glucose because of the alcohol, your blood sugar will drop even more.

If your liver is damaged, such as from hepatitis or cirrhosis, it will be harder for your body to make glucose. Alcohol will damage your liver more.

In general, limit alcohol to 1 drink a day with a meal if you are a woman. If you are a man, limit alcohol to 2 drinks a day with a meal. The following is considered a standard drink:

- One 12-ounce bottle of beer or wine cooler
- One 5-ounce glass of wine
- One mixed drink with 1.5 ounces of 80-proof hard liquor, such as gin, whiskey, or rum

Choose alcoholic drinks wisely. With hard alcohol, use sugar-free mixers, such as diet tonic, water, or club soda. If you use mixers that have sugar, remember to count the carbohydrate in them. Pick drinks that have less alcohol,

including light beer or dry wine. Or add club soda to wine to dilute it.

When you drink, check your blood sugar before you go to bed. Have a snack before bed so your blood sugar does not drop while you sleep.

Heavy drinking over time will damage your liver. If your liver is damaged, it will be harder to produce glucose. This will make it harder to control your diabetes.

Who should avoid alcohol completely?

- Do not drink if you have nerve damage. Drinking can make it worse and increase the pain, numbness, and other symptoms.

- Do not drink if you have high blood pressure.
- Do not drink if you have diabetic eye disease.
- Do not drink if you have high triglycerides, a type of fat in your blood. Drinking can raise triglycerides.
- Do not drink if you are pregnant or could get pregnant. Do not drink if you are breast-feeding.
- If you are trying to lose weight, remember that alcohol has empty calories that do not give you any nutrients.