

Your Health: Alcohol



Many people can enjoy a drink now and then, but alcohol can be dangerous. It can cause accidents and health problems, and it can lead to addiction. Some people should not drink at all. They may not be able to control their drinking, or they may have health problems that alcohol makes worse.

For most adults, moderate drinking is not harmful. Moderate drinking means having no more than:

- 2 drinks a day for men.
- 1 drink a day for women and people over the age of 65.

Drinking more than this puts you at risk for physical and mental problems and addiction.

What is a standard drink?

Beer, wine, and hard liquor all contain alcohol. The following common drinks have equal amounts of alcohol and are often called "a drink" or "a standard drink":

- One 12-ounce can or bottle of beer
- One 5-ounce glass of wine

- One mixed drink that has 1.5 ounces of hard liquor

Alcohol and your health

Alcohol and health problems

Studies have found that for some people light drinking may have some health benefits, such as lowering the risk of heart disease or stroke. But the idea that "if a little is good, a lot must be better" is not true when it comes to alcohol. Over time, drinking too much can:

- Harm your liver, nervous system, heart, and brain.
- Lead to stomach problems.
- Lead to certain types of cancer.
- Lead to high blood pressure, which is linked to heart disease.
- Affect your medicines and make them unsafe or not work as well.
- Lead to sexual problems, such as impotence.
- Lead to thin, brittle bones (osteoporosis).
- Lead to violence, accidents, social isolation, jail or prison time, and problems at work, school, or home.

The American Heart Association says that if you do not drink now, you should **not** start drinking. The risks outweigh the possible benefits.

If you are pregnant, you should not drink any alcohol, because it may harm your baby.

Alcohol and calories

Alcohol has calories but has no nutritional value. Most beers have about 150 calories. A standard drink of wine or hard liquor has about 100 calories. These unneeded calories can add up if you are trying to lose weight.

Alcohol and diabetes

If you have diabetes, drink no more than 1 alcoholic drink at each sitting, and drink it with a meal. If you drink on an empty stomach, you can make your blood sugar level too low (hypoglycemia). This is especially true if you take insulin.

Alcohol and blood pressure

Drinking more than 3 drinks a day can:

- Increase your blood pressure.
- Increase your risk of stroke.
- Interfere with certain blood pressure medicines.

If you are trying to lower your blood pressure, do not drink at all, or ask your doctor how much alcohol is safe for you.

Alcohol and depression

A lot of people who are depressed have problems with alcohol. Sometimes the depression comes first, and people drink as a way to escape it. Other times, drinking comes first and then people get depressed. It may seem like alcohol makes you feel better, but it actually makes you feel worse. Depression can be caused or made worse by:

- Alcohol itself.
- Withdrawal from alcohol, if you are addicted.
- Problems caused by your alcohol use.

If you are depressed or have been depressed in the past, it is best not to drink at all. If you do drink, drink very little.

Safe use of alcohol

Although most people can safely have a drink now and then, some people should not drink at all or should drink very little.

Do not drink any alcohol if:

- You are pregnant or trying to get pregnant.
- You are taking over-the-counter or prescription medicines that interact with alcohol.
- You have health problems worsened by drinking, such as liver problems, heart failure, uncontrolled high blood pressure, or certain blood disorders.
- You had alcohol problems in the past and you do not drink now.
- You are younger than 21.
- You plan to drive or operate dangerous machinery.

Be extra cautious when you drink if:

- You have ever had a mood disorder such as depression.
- You have a family history of alcohol problems.

Talk to your doctor about whether drinking alcohol is safe for you, and if so, how much is okay.

If you are having trouble cutting back or quitting, see your doctor or another health professional for help. You may not be able to quit on your own even if you want to. But with help, you can do it.