

Alcohol [1]

This section has been reviewed and approved by the [Cancer.Net Editorial Board](#) [2], 03/2014

Key Messages:

- Drinking alcohol can increase your risk of several cancers due to how it interacts with your body, especially when combined with tobacco use.
- There is no proven way to prevent cancer, but if you don't drink it is best not to start. If you do drink, limit the amount you have each week and avoid binge drinking.
- Generally, men should have no more than two alcoholic drinks a day, and woman should have no more than one a day. However, women should probably have no more than three to four drinks a week.

In addition to [tobacco](#) [3], alcohol is one of the few substances consistently linked to an increased risk of cancer. Drinking alcohol increases the risk of developing several cancers:

- [Head and neck cancers](#) [4], particularly cancers of the mouth, pharynx (throat), and larynx (voice box).
- [Liver cancer](#) [5]
- [Esophageal cancer](#) [6]
- [Breast cancer](#) [7]
- [Colon and rectal cancer](#) [8]
- [Stomach cancer](#) [9]

Exactly why alcohol raises cancer risk is still being studied. Alcohol likely contributes to cancer when people are exposed to two chemicals in alcohol that can damage the DNA of healthy cells. These two chemicals are ethanol, which is the primary component of alcoholic beverages and acetaldehyde, which is made when alcohol is broken down or digested by the body. Alcohol may affect the breakdown of hormones, such as estrogen, a factor in breast, ovarian, and uterine cancers. Drinking alcohol also may weaken the body's ability to process and absorb important nutrients, including vitamin A, folate, vitamin C, vitamins D and E, and carotenoids. In addition, alcohol can be a cause of [weight gain](#) [10], which also increases cancer risk.

The type of alcohol, such as wine, beer, or liquor, you drink does not affect the risk associated with developing these cancers. However, the more alcohol you drink, especially the more drinks you have regularly over time, may increase your cancer risk.

Recommendations for alcohol use

There is no proven way to completely prevent cancer, but there are steps you can take to lower your risk, especially your risk from alcohol:

- Limit the number of alcoholic beverages you drink to one drink a day for women and two drinks a day for men. It's important to remember that one drink is 12 ounces (oz) of beer, 5 oz of wine, or 1.5 oz of 80-proof distilled spirits (liquor). Women who are concerned about their risk of breast cancer may also want to further limit their alcohol intake to no more than three to four drinks a week.
- Binge drinking or drinking more alcohol than recommended above per day, yet on fewer days, is not recommended and may still increase your risk for certain cancers.
- There is no clear evidence to support that drinking red wine helps to prevent cancer, so the current recommended limits also apply to red wine.
- Avoid using both alcohol and tobacco products. The combination further increases the risks of developing cancers of the oral cavity, pharynx, larynx, and esophagus, compared with those who use only alcohol or only tobacco.
- The combination of alcohol and menopausal hormone therapy with estrogen may further increase the risk of some cancers, such as breast cancer.
- People who have a high risk for the cancers discussed above should talk with their doctors about limiting or even avoiding alcohol to help decrease their risk.
- If you have cancer, you may need to completely avoid alcohol depending on the treatment(s) you are receiving. For example, alcohol may irritate or worsen mouth sores [11] or dry mouth [12] caused by treatment and may also increase the risk of side effects from treatment by dehydrating the body [13] or causing a loss of nutrients.

Alcohol and cancer recurrence

In studies of alcohol and breast cancer survivors, moderate alcohol use has not been shown to increase the risk of recurrence (return of the cancer) or lower the survival of women with breast cancer.

Information about the effect of recurrence or survival following the diagnosis of other cancers is limited. However, because research suggests that drinking heavily is associated with a higher risk of developing some cancers, it is probably still best to avoid heavy drinking after a cancer diagnosis. All cancer survivors are encouraged to talk with their doctors about how much alcohol they drink and the effect it could have on their long-term health.

More Information

[Prevention and Health Living \[14\]](#)

[Understanding Cancer Risk \[15\]](#)

Additional Resource

[National Cancer Institute: Alcohol and Cancer Risk \[16\]](#)

Links:

[1] <http://www.cancer.net/navigating-cancer-care/prevention-and-healthy-living/diet-and-nutrition/alcohol>

[2] <http://www.cancer.net/about-us>

[3] <http://www.cancer.net/node/25002>

[4] <http://www.cancer.net/node/18909>

[5] <http://www.cancer.net/node/19134>

[6] <http://www.cancer.net/node/18783>

[7] <http://www.cancer.net/node/18618>

[8] <http://www.cancer.net/node/18701>

[9] <http://www.cancer.net/node/19645>

[10] <http://www.cancer.net/node/25008>

[11] <http://www.cancer.net/node/25051>

[12] <http://www.cancer.net/node/25047>

[13] <http://www.cancer.net/node/24702>

[14] <http://www.cancer.net/node/24868>

[15] <http://www.cancer.net/node/25007>

[16] <http://www.cancer.gov/cancertopics/factsheet/Risk/alcohol>