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PDF generated on July 19, 2016 from

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[Alcohol](#) [1]

This section has been reviewed and approved by the [Cancer.Net Editorial Board](#) [2], 04/2016

Like tobacco, alcohol is one of the few substances consistently linked to an increased risk of cancer. The type of alcohol—wine, beer, or liquor—doesn't matter.

Drinking alcohol increases the risk of developing these cancer types:

- [Head and neck cancers](#) [3]. Particularly cancers of the mouth, pharynx (throat), and larynx (voice box).
- [Liver cancer](#) [4]
- [Esophageal cancer](#) [5]
- [Breast cancer](#) [6]
- [Colorectal cancer](#) [7]
- [Stomach cancer](#) [8]

Reasons why alcohol may raise cancer risk

Researchers are still trying to discover why alcohol raises cancer risk. Here are some possibilities:

- The increased risk may be related to two chemicals that can damage the DNA of healthy cells:
 - Ethanol, which is the primary part of alcoholic beverages
 - Acetaldehyde, which is made when alcohol is digested by the body
- Alcohol may affect the breakdown of the hormone estrogen, which increases the amount of estrogen in the blood. Having more estrogen in the body than usual is a factor in breast, ovarian, and uterine cancers. This is a particular concern for women before menopause and women taking menopausal hormone therapy.
- Drinking alcohol may weaken the body's ability to process and absorb important nutrients, including:
 - Vitamin A
 - Vitamin C
 - Vitamin D
 - Vitamin E
 - Folate
 - Carotenoids
- Alcohol can cause [weight gain](#) [9], which also increases cancer risk.

The amount of alcohol you drink—particularly over time—may increase your cancer risk.

Recommendations for alcohol use

There is no proven way to completely prevent cancer. However, there are steps you can take to lower your alcohol-related risk:

- Limit the number of alcoholic beverages you drink. For women, limit it to 1 drink a day. For men, limit it to 2 drinks a day. A drink is defined as:
 - 12 ounces (oz) or 341 milliliters (ml) of beer
 - 5 oz or 142 ml of wine
 - 1.5 oz or 43 ml of 80-proof liquor

Women concerned about their breast cancer risk may want to further limit their alcohol intake to no more than 3 to 4 drinks a week.

- Do not binge drink, meaning drink more alcohol than recommended per day. This may increase your risk for certain cancers, even if it happens infrequently.
- Do not make an exception for red wine. There is no clear evidence that drinking red wine helps to prevent cancer. Thus, the current recommended limits apply to red wine.
- Avoid using both alcohol and tobacco products. The combination further increases the risks of developing certain cancers. These include cancers of the oral cavity, pharynx, larynx, and esophagus.
- Eating enough folate may help protect against the risk of some cancers linked with alcohol, such as breast cancer. Folate is found in leafy, green vegetables, fruit, and dried beans and peas.
- Talk with your doctor if you receive menopausal hormone therapy. Combined with alcohol, this may further increase the risk of some cancers, such as breast cancer.

- Talk with your doctor if you have a high risk for the cancers mentioned. The doctor may recommend limiting or avoiding alcohol to help decrease the risk.
- Ask your doctor if you need to avoid alcohol because of the treatment(s) you are receiving. For example, alcohol may irritate or worsen treatment-related [mouth sores](#) [10] or [dry mouth](#) [11]. Additionally, alcohol may increase the risk of side effects from treatment by causing [dehydration](#) [12] or nutrient loss.

Alcohol and cancer recurrence

In studies of breast cancer survivors, moderate alcohol use was not shown to increase the risk of recurrence. Recurrence is the return of the cancer. Additionally, moderate alcohol use was not shown to lower the survival rates.

Similar information about other types of cancers is limited. However, it is probably still best to avoid heavy drinking after a cancer diagnosis because of the link to cancer risk.

If you are a cancer survivor, talk with your doctor about how much alcohol you drink and the effect it could have on your long-term health.

More Information

[Prevention and Health Living](#) [13]

[Understanding Cancer Risk](#) [14]

Additional Resource

National Cancer Institute: [Alcohol and Cancer Risk](#) [15]

Links

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

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

[3] <http://www.cancer.net/node/31296>

[4] <http://www.cancer.net/node/31274>

[5] <http://www.cancer.net/node/31310>

[6] <http://www.cancer.net/node/31322>

[7] <http://www.cancer.net/node/31317>

[8] <http://www.cancer.net/node/31376>

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

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

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

[12] <http://www.cancer.net/node/31521>

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

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

[15] <http://www.cancer.gov/about-cancer/causes-prevention/risk/alcohol/alcohol-fact-sheet>