

Alcohol: Effects on Health

How does alcohol affect physical health?

Alcohol can affect your body in many ways. Heavy alcohol use or frequent drinking may:

- Prevent a good night's sleep, or make sleep problems worse. Alcohol may help you fall asleep, but when the drink wears off, you may wake up earlier. You may also wake up more often to urinate.
- Cause damage to your stomach, liver, pancreas, or small intestine. Damage to your small intestine makes it hard for your body to absorb vitamins and nutrients from food.
- Increase your risk for cancer of the pancreas, mouth, tongue, and throat. This risk is even higher if you also use tobacco.
- Cause health problems like redness and swelling of your joints, high blood pressure, heart disease, cancer, or stroke.
- Cause poor nutrition from a loss of protein, minerals, and vitamins. Lack of some vitamins can cause problems with memory, thinking, or walking. You may have symptoms such as muscle cramps, numbness, tingling, and weakness in your legs and hands.

Alcohol can also:

- Change your blood sugar levels, which can lead to problems if you have diabetes
- Cause problems with how your medicines work
- Make other medical problems worse, such as heart disease or kidney disease
- Cause injuries from falls and other accidents

Many healthcare providers advise women not to drink any alcohol while trying to become pregnant, during pregnancy, or while breast-feeding. If you drink alcohol while you are pregnant, you are at risk for:

- Miscarriage
- Premature labor
- Having a low birth-weight baby
- Stillbirth
- Giving birth to a child who has birth defects

How does alcohol affect mental health?

Heavy drinking can change how you think, feel, and act. You may be angry, irritable, or jealous. As drinking problems get worse, you may argue or fight at home, at work, and with friends. This can lead to violence, child abuse, and losing your family, job, and friends. Alcohol can cause or worsen mental health problems such as anxiety, depression, bipolar disorder, or schizophrenia.

Many violent crimes, such as sexual abuse, assault, and murders are related to alcohol abuse. Drunk drivers cause about half the deaths from car accidents in the US.

How much is too much?

Moderate drinking is no more than 1 drink per day for a woman and no more than 2 drinks per day for man.

If you are a man under age 65, you may be at risk for abusing alcohol if you have more than 2 drinks a day (14 drinks in 1 week), or more than 4 drinks in a row.

If you are older than 65, or you are a woman, you may be at risk for abusing alcohol if you have more than 1 drink per day (7 drinks in 1 week), or more than 3 drinks in a row. Examples of 1 drink are:

- 12 ounces of beer
- 5 ounces of wine
- 1.5 ounces of 80-proof distilled spirits such as whiskey or vodka.

Some people should not drink at all. You should not drink alcohol if you:

- Cannot control how much you drink
- Need to drive, operate machinery, or do anything that requires you to be alert and coordinated
- Have medical conditions such as ulcers or liver disease
- Take medicines that do not mix with alcohol

Before you choose to drink alcohol, even in small amounts, talk with your healthcare provider. Your provider can give you the best advice for your health.

Developed by RelayHealth.

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