

# Diabetes: Alcohol in the Diet

## If I have diabetes, is it OK to drink alcohol?

You should never drink alcohol if:

- You have trouble controlling your blood sugar level.
- You have complications from diabetes such as heart, nerve, or eye problems.
- You have a high level of cholesterol and triglycerides, which are the fatty materials in your blood.

If you don't have any complications and your blood sugar is in good control, it may be OK for you to drink alcohol sometimes. Ask your healthcare provider if it is safe for you to drink alcohol.

The general guidelines for how much alcohol is safe to drink are the same as for people who don't have diabetes. If you choose to drink alcohol, women should have no more than 1 drink a day and men no more than 2 drinks per day. A drink equals 12 ounces of regular beer, 5 ounces of wine, or 1 and 1/2 ounces of 80-proof distilled spirits such as whiskey or vodka.

## How does alcohol affect my body?

If you take insulin or diabetes pills, you have an even greater risk for low blood sugar because alcohol increases the effects of the medicine. If you take some diabetes medicines with alcohol, it can cause serious health problems. Always ask your healthcare provider if it is safe to drink alcohol with any medicines that you take.

Alcohol can affect your body's ability to recover from a low blood sugar level. If you have low blood sugar while you are drinking, you may need to treat it more than once. Check your blood sugar often. Keep a high-carbohydrate snack or glucose tablets on hand to treat low blood sugar.

Alcohol can make some health problems worse, such as:

- Nerve damage in your arms or legs
- Eye disease
- Liver disease

Drinking too much alcohol raises blood pressure. High blood pressure can worsen problems caused by diabetes, such as kidney failure, retinopathy, and heart disease.

## How do I fit alcohol into my meal plan?

- Do not take extra medicine to make up for the carbohydrates in alcohol you drink.
- Never drink alcohol on an empty stomach. Always eat a meal or a snack that contains carbohydrate (bread, cereal, fruit, or milk) before or with your drink.

You need to be careful because alcohol can make your blood sugar level too low. Never skip meals or substitute alcohol for a meal.

- Alcohol is high in calories. If you eat snacks or meals to avoid low blood sugar, alcohol can make you go over your calorie limit. To better control how many calories you eat and drink:
  - Try to choose drinks and mixers that are not too high in alcohol, carbohydrates (sugars), and calories. Examples are dry or light wines; light beers; and sugar-free mixers such as diet soda, water, seltzer, club soda, and low-salt vegetable juice.
  - Avoid sweet wines, wine coolers, and sweet liqueurs, such as Irish Cream. Watch out for sweet or frozen drinks, such as margaritas and daiquiris. They can have hundreds of calories and lots of added sugar.
  - You could also drink nonalcoholic beer or wine. Count every 15 grams of total carbohydrate in a nonalcoholic drink as 1 carb choice in your food plan.
- It is better to drink water rather than alcohol before, during, and after exercise. Drinking alcohol before or during exercise can cause blood sugar to go dangerously low. This can happen even hours after the physical activity.
- If you cook with alcohol, use regular drinking wine, not cooking wine. There is less sodium in the drinking wine. Cook the food slowly so that the alcohol has time to burn off.
- If you have been drinking, always check your blood sugar before you go to sleep. It should be at least 100 to 140 milligrams per deciliter (mg/dL). Eat a snack before bedtime to keep from having low blood sugar while you sleep.
- Always wear a diabetes alert bracelet or necklace. The signs and symptoms of low blood sugar and being drunk from alcohol are similar.

For more information, contact

- The American Diabetes Association  
800-342-2383  
<http://www.diabetes.org>

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