

# Alcohol: Effects on Health

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## KEY POINTS

- Alcohol can cause or worsen physical health problems and damage your heart, stomach, liver, kidneys, and brain.
  - Alcohol can cause or worsen mental health problems, including uncontrolled anger, anxiety, depression, and schizophrenia.
  - For most people, moderate drinking is no more than 1 drink per day for a woman and no more than 2 drinks per day for a man. Your healthcare provider can advise you how much is safe for you to drink.
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## 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, too much alcohol means:

- 14 drinks in 1 week
- More than 4 drinks in any 1 day (binge drinking)

If you are a woman or over age 65, too much alcohol means:

- 7 drinks in 1 week
- More than 3 drinks in any 1 day (binge drinking)

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

There are several changes in the way alcohol affects you as you get older:

- Alcohol has a stronger effect because your body processes it more slowly.
- Reaction time slows down with age, and alcohol slows it even more.
- You are more likely to get confused if you drink too much.

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

- Are pregnant
- Are under 21 years old
- 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

If you take a lot of acetaminophen (Tylenol), drinking alcohol is more likely to damage your liver. Unless recommended by your provider, don't take more than 3000 milligrams (mg) in 24 hours. To make sure you don't take too much, check other medicines you take to see if they also contain acetaminophen. If you drink alcohol regularly, ask your healthcare provider what dosage is safe.

If you take daily anti-inflammatory medicines such as ibuprofen or naproxen, do not drink alcohol unless your healthcare provider approves. It may increase the risk of stomach problems such as gastritis or ulcers.

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.

## **How does alcohol affect physical health?**

Alcohol can affect your body in many ways. More than moderate alcohol use may:

- Cause sleep problems. 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.
- Damage 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.
- Cause your heart to get bigger and weaken your heart muscle. This can lead to heart failure, which means that your heart muscle cannot pump enough blood to meet your body's needs. Heavy drinking of alcohol is also a common cause of irregular and fast heartbeats, called atrial fibrillation.
- Increase your risk for cancer of the pancreas, mouth, tongue, and throat. This risk is even higher if you also use tobacco.
- Lead to health problems such as gout (a type of arthritis), high blood pressure, or stroke.
- Lead to poor nutrition if alcohol replaces food, with 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 body's insulin and blood glucose (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 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 breastfeeding. 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.

*This content is reviewed periodically and is subject to change as new health information becomes available. The information is intended to inform and educate and is not a replacement for medical evaluation, advice, diagnosis or treatment by a healthcare professional.*

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