

# Alcohol and Cancer

Did You Know...



Alcohol Causes 7 Types of Cancer!

**No? Well, you're not alone.**

According to a [recent study](#), only 30% of Americans know alcohol use can cause cancer. The damaging effects of drinking can get overlooked in a culture that too often associates alcohol use with a healthy lifestyle. The alcohol industry sends us messages that contradict the facts, which can be hard to figure out. Do you ever wonder, what exactly does “heavy drinking” mean? What is “responsible”, “lower risk” or “moderate” drinking? How much is a “drink” anyway? Read on for straight-forward answers to your questions.

Find out more...

**Does alcohol use *really* cause cancer?**

Yes. Alcohol increases your risk for at least [seven types of cancer](#).

- ▶ Mouth
- ▶ Throat
- ▶ Voice Box
- ▶ Esophagus
- ▶ Female Breast
- ▶ Liver
- ▶ Colorectal

Alcohol [may be a risk factor](#) for other cancers, such as pancreatic, gastric and lung cancer, but more research is needed.

**A couple of drinks won't increase my risk, right?**

Any amount of alcohol — [even low levels of drinking](#) — increases your risk for cancer. But the *more* you drink and the *longer* you drink, the higher your risk. This is especially true for head and neck cancers.

**Is alcohol as important as other cancer risk factors?**

Yes. [Alcohol use has a greater effect](#) on your cancer risk than occupational hazards, UV radiation, or protective behaviors like physical exercise and breastfeeding (while tobacco use, diet, and obesity are greater risk factors).

**Does the type of alcohol I drink matter?**

No. The type of alcohol you drink—wine, beer, or liquor—[does not matter](#) when it comes to cancer risk.

**How exactly does alcohol cause cancer?**

Researchers have identified [many ways](#) alcohol can cause cancer.

**FOR EXAMPLE:**

- ▶ When alcohol breaks down in your body, the process produces something called acetaldehyde, which is a carcinogen.
- ▶ Alcohol can impair your body's ability to break down and absorb certain nutrients associated with cancer risk.
- ▶ For women, alcohol can increase your body's levels of estrogen, which has links to breast cancer.

If you smoke *and* drink, your [cancer risk is even greater](#).



Alcohol use contributes to about **3.5% of all cancer deaths** and **15% of breast cancer deaths in the US.**

**North Carolina** is on the right track! More than [50% of adults](#) in our state do **NOT** drink regularly. Together we can promote wellness and reduce the negative impact of alcohol in our communities.

## But red wine is good for my heart, right?

Some past studies have shown a relationship between red wine and decreased heart disease risk. But researchers believe this relationship likely has been overstated. The connection may be explained by other lifestyle factors, such as increased physical activity among wine drinkers. The American Heart Association does not recommend drinking wine to gain these benefits. And heavy drinking can lead to serious heart problems!

## What can I do to decrease my cancer risk?

*Drink less!* And avoid excessive drinking. If you don't drink, don't start. If you do choose to drink, experts recommend you do so only occasionally: **no more than one drink per day for women; no more than two drinks per day for men**. Remember, *any* amount of alcohol raises your risk!

Think you may be drinking too much? Consider ways to cut down or quit. Concerned about your cancer risk? Start by talking with your health care provider.

## What is “a drink”?

Alcohol beverages that are packaged or sold in larger sizes or with higher alcohol content are considered to be MORE than one drink. In the US, one standard drink is defined as:



12 oz. of beer  
(5% alcohol)

8 oz. of malt liquor  
(7% alcohol)

5 oz. of wine  
(12% alcohol)

1.5 oz. of liquor  
(40% alcohol)

## If I stop drinking, will my cancer risk return to that of a non-drinker?

*Possibly.* Researchers believe that your risk for alcohol related cancers will decrease over time and may return to that of a non-drinker after about 15-20 years of being alcohol free.

## What can I do to decrease alcohol-related cancers in my community?

You can create environments that discourage excessive drinking and support healthy decisions about alcohol. This happens when alcohol is less **available**, less **attractive**, less **affordable** and when excessive drinking is less **acceptable**. Families, communities, policy-makers and public health all have a role to make this happen.

- ▶ **Adults** can set a positive example by always giving guests a non-alcoholic option at gatherings, and by securing and monitoring alcohol in the home.
- ▶ **Communities and groups** planning local festivals and events can use smaller cup sizes and place limits on the number of beverages that can be purchased at one time. They can limit alcohol industry sponsorship, especially in “family friendly” or wellness related events.
- ▶ **State law and policy-makers** can increase the price of alcohol, limit availability, and continue to support an alcoholic beverage control system (ABC) vs privatization of alcohol sales.
- ▶ **Healthcare providers** can inform all patients of the link between alcohol and cancer, and offer screening, intervention and referral.

“Excessive drinking” includes **heavy drinking** and **binge drinking**.



### For WOMEN:

Heavy drinking =  
8+ drinks per week

Binge drinking =  
4+ drinks in 2-3 hrs



### For MEN:

Heavy drinking =  
15+ drinks per week

Binge drinking =  
5+ drinks in 2-3 hrs

## Bottom line.

**Alcohol can cause cancer.** What can *you* do? 1) Cut back or quit. 2) Share this information with friends, family and colleagues. 3) Discourage underage and excessive alcohol use and urge your community to change its alcohol environment.