

Alcohol & Cancer

Frequently Asked Questions

Does drinking really cause cancer?

Yes, research shows that drinking alcohol is linked to an increased risk of several types of cancer. Alcohol is a carcinogen, which means it is known to cause cancer in humans. In Canada, drinking alcohol is linked to about 7,000 cases of cancer each year.¹

This does not mean that everyone who drinks alcohol will develop cancer. However, the chance of developing cancer is higher among people who drink alcohol, especially among those who drink more than two standard drinks per week.

How does alcohol increase the risk of cancer?

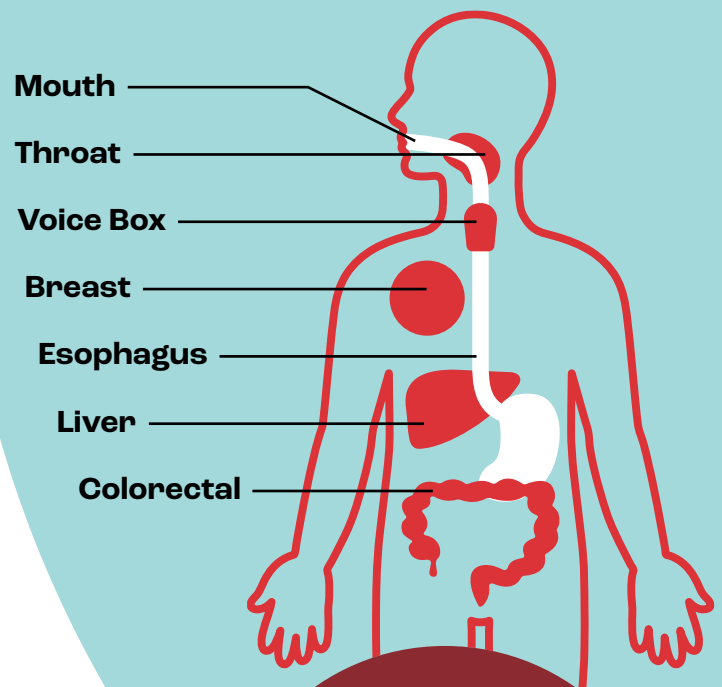
Drinking alcohol can increase the risk of cancer in a few ways. All alcoholic drinks have something called ethanol (ethyl alcohol). When our bodies break down ethanol, it damages DNA and stops our bodies from fixing it. That damage over time may cause cancer.

Alcohol use can also affect the risk of cancer in other ways by:

- ▶ Raising blood levels of certain hormones such as estrogen, a risk factor for breast cancer
- ▶ Making it easier for other toxins, like those found in tobacco smoke, to pass through the mouth and into the bloodstream
- ▶ Lowering the body's ability to process and absorb important nutrients, such as folate, which are needed for cells to stay healthy

Which types of cancer are associated with drinking alcohol?

There is strong evidence that drinking alcohol raises the risk of many types of cancers, including cancers of the breast, colon, rectum, mouth and throat (pharynx), liver, esophagus (food pipe) and larynx (voice box).³



Did you know?

Drinking 2 to 3 alcoholic drinks per day doubles the risk of developing cancer of the esophagus.²



What is a standard drink?



Beer

341 ml (12oz) of beer
5% alcohol



Cooler, cider, ready-to-drink

341 ml (12oz) of drinks
5% alcohol



Wine

142 ml (5oz) of wine
12% alcohol



Spirits

(whisky, vodka, gin, etc.)
43 ml (1.5oz) of spirits
40% alcohol

How much alcohol is considered safe?

There is no safe level of alcohol use when it comes to cancer risk. Even small amounts of alcohol can raise the risk of certain cancers. The less alcohol a person drinks, the better.

Does the type of alcohol matter when it comes to cancer risk?

No, the type of alcohol you drink does not matter when it comes to cancer risk. Beer, wine, and spirits all contain ethanol, which can raise your risk of cancer. What matters is the total amount and how often you drink alcohol, not the type of drink.

What are the health benefits to drinking alcohol?

You may have heard that drinking small to moderate amounts of alcohol, such as a glass of red wine a day, can be good for the heart. However, the latest evidence does not back this up. There is no clear evidence to support the idea that drinking red wine lowers the risk of cancer. Drinking more than two alcoholic drinks per week puts someone at moderate risk for cancer as well as other diseases like liver disease and cardiovascular disease.³

Is it true that alcohol affects women and men differently?

Too much alcohol can take a toll on anyone's health, regardless of their sex or gender identity. However, research has shown that there are biological differences in the ways that women and men process alcohol. For example, women absorb more alcohol in their bloodstream even when drinking the same amount of alcohol as men.⁴ These biological differences mean that women may have more damage and disease at lower levels of alcohol use than men.

Resources and Supports

If you want to cut down, there are digital supports and online communities to get you started and keep you motivated. If you are concerned about your drinking, you're not alone. Help is available.

Talk to your health care provider, or try one of the supports listed at: straightupfacts.ca.



References

1. Runggay, H., Shield, K., Charvat, H., Ferrari, P., Sonnpaisarn, B., Obot, I., et al. (2021) Global burden of cancer in 2020 attributable to alcohol consumption: a population-based study. *Lancet Oncology* 22(8), P1071-1080. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S1470-2045\(21\)00279-5](https://doi.org/10.1016/S1470-2045(21)00279-5)
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4. Greaves, L., Poole, N., Brabete, A. C., & Wolfson, L. (2022). *Sex, gender and alcohol: What matters for women in low-risk drinking guidelines?* Ottawa, Ont.: Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction. Available from <https://ccsa.ca/sites/default/files/2022-08/CCSA-LRDG-Sex-Gender-and-Alcohol-what-matters-for-Women-in-LRDGs-en.pdf>