HEALTH BASICS

Alcohol use and safe drinking

An explanation of alcohol intake, lower-risk choices, and when drinking needs medical attention.

WHAT IT IS
Guidance for understanding alcohol intake and reducing related harm

WHERE IT COMES UP
Drink labels, health visits, pregnancy, medicines, and driving

WHY IT MATTERS
Alcohol can affect judgment, organs, medicines, and cancer risk

WHAT IT IS NOT
Not a disease or a diagnosis

WHO TO ASK
A primary care clinician, pharmacist, or alcohol support service

HOW IT IS CHECKED
Drink records, screening questionnaires, and sometimes blood or breath tests

Overview

Alcohol use means drinking beverages that contain ethanol, such as beer, wine, cider, or spirits. "Safe drinking" is a way of discussing risk. It does not mean that any amount of alcohol is guaranteed to be harmless.

In general, drinking less alcohol means less risk. Some health guidance uses terms such as "moderate" or "lower-risk" drinking. The exact limits differ between countries and may consider age, sex, pregnancy, health conditions, and drinking pattern. They are limits, not targets.

If you do not drink, there is no health reason to start. If you do drink, understanding serving sizes and your own circumstances can help you make informed choices.

Alcohol use itself is not a disease or diagnosis. Alcohol use disorder is a separate medical condition involving difficulty controlling alcohol use despite harm. Only a qualified clinician can assess that diagnosis.

How it works

Alcohol passes from the stomach and small intestine into the bloodstream. It reaches the brain and begins affecting attention, coordination, reaction time, judgment, and mood. These effects can begin before a person appears obviously intoxicated.

The liver breaks down most alcohol. It first changes ethanol into acetaldehyde, a toxic chemical, and then into substances the body can remove or use for energy. The body needs time for this process. Coffee, exercise, cold showers, vomiting, and sleep do not make alcohol leave the bloodstream quickly.

Blood alcohol concentration is the amount of alcohol in the blood. It is affected by how much and how quickly you drink, whether you have eaten, body size and composition, medicines, and individual metabolism. Two people drinking the same amount may be affected differently.

A "standard drink" helps compare beverages by the amount of pure alcohol they contain. Definitions differ by country. In the United States, one standard drink contains about 14 grams of pure alcohol. That is roughly:

These are examples, not standard serving sizes everywhere. A large wine glass, strong beer, cocktail, or generous measure of spirits may contain more than one standard drink. Check both the container size and alcohol by volume, shown as ABV on many labels.

- 12 fluid ounces of 5% beer
- 5 fluid ounces of 12% wine
- 1.5 fluid ounces of 40% spirits

Why it matters for your health

Alcohol can impair driving, swimming, operating equipment, and other activities that require quick decisions. Risk rises when several drinks are consumed over a short period because the blood alcohol concentration increases faster.

Regular or heavy alcohol exposure can affect many parts of the body. It is linked with high blood pressure, abnormal heart rhythms, liver disease, pancreatitis, nerve damage, and several cancers. Alcohol can also disturb sleep and worsen some mental health problems, even if it initially feels relaxing.

Alcohol is an established cause of cancer. It is linked with cancers of the mouth, throat, voice box, esophagus, liver, breast, and colon and rectum. Cancer risk generally rises as alcohol intake increases, but risk is not completely absent at lower intake.

Alcohol can interact with medicines. Combining it with opioids like oxycodone or morphine , benzodiazepines, sleeping medicines, or other sedating drugs can dangerously slow breathing

or reduce alertness. It can also interact with some antidepressants like sertraline or fluoxetine , diabetes medicines, blood thinners like warfarin or apixaban , pain medicines, and other products. A pharmacist can check your specific medicines.

Alcohol during pregnancy can affect fetal development. No amount or timing has been established as safe during pregnancy. If you are pregnant, may be pregnant, or are trying to become pregnant, discuss alcohol use with a maternity or primary care clinician. Support is available without judgment.

What can go wrong

Alcohol is related to several distinct conditions and situations:

Call emergency services if someone cannot be woken, has a seizure, is breathing slowly or irregularly, repeatedly vomits while very drowsy, or has pale, blue, grey, or clammy skin. Stay with them and place them on their side if possible. Do not assume they can "sleep it off," and do not give coffee or put them in a cold shower.

Confusion, hallucinations, seizures, or severe shaking after reducing alcohol may be severe withdrawal and need emergency care. If you drink heavily or develop shaking, sweating, nausea, anxiety, or a racing heartbeat when alcohol wears off, seek medical advice before stopping suddenly.

Routine follow-up is appropriate if your intake is increasing, you often drink more than intended, you have blackouts, or alcohol is affecting sleep, mood, work, relationships, or health. These concerns do not by themselves confirm a diagnosis.

- Acute intoxication: temporary impairment of judgment, coordination, memory, and reaction time
- Alcohol poisoning: a medical emergency in which alcohol disrupts breathing, consciousness, temperature control, or other vital functions
- Injuries: including falls, burns, drowning, violence, and road traffic crashes
- Alcohol use disorder: an ongoing pattern involving impaired control, harmful consequences, or both
- Alcohol-related liver disease: liver injury ranging from fat buildup to inflammation and scarring
- Pancreatitis: painful inflammation of the pancreas

- Alcohol withdrawal: symptoms that can occur when someone who is physically dependent suddenly stops or sharply reduces drinking
- Fetal alcohol spectrum disorders: lifelong effects caused by alcohol exposure before birth
- Cancer and cardiovascular disease: conditions whose risk may increase with alcohol exposure

What you can do

Start by finding out how much alcohol is actually in your drinks. Record the drink type, container size, ABV, and number consumed. A written note or tracking app can make patterns easier to see.

Practical ways to reduce risk include:

Food may slow alcohol absorption, and water can help with hydration, but neither prevents intoxication or alcohol poisoning.

Ask a pharmacist whether alcohol is safe with your prescription medicines, over-the-counter products, or supplements. Ask a clinician about a brief alcohol screening questionnaire if you are unsure about your pattern. Common tools include AUDIT-C and the full AUDIT questionnaire. Blood or breath tests can measure recent exposure in some settings, while other blood tests may show possible effects on the body. No single test fully describes a person's drinking pattern.

If cutting down has been difficult, support can include counseling, peer support, and medical treatment. If physical dependence may be present, a clinician can help plan a safer reduction or medically supervised withdrawal.

- Set a limit before drinking and keep count
- Choose smaller or lower-alcohol drinks
- Drink slowly and include alcohol-free drinks
- Avoid situations where you feel pressured to keep drinking
- Do not drive, cycle in traffic, swim, or operate machinery after drinking
- Do not combine alcohol with sedating or interacting medicines
- Avoid "saving up" drinks for one occasion

Common questions

Is there a completely safe amount of alcohol?

No amount can be guaranteed risk-free. Lower intake generally carries less risk than higher intake. Personal circumstances, including pregnancy, medicines, medical conditions, and planned activities, may make avoiding alcohol the safest choice.

Is red wine good for the heart?

Alcohol should not be started for possible heart benefits. Research on alcohol and heart health is complicated by diet, income, smoking, and other differences between groups. Alcohol also has established risks, including cancer.

Can I save my weekly allowance for one night?

Drinking several drinks in a short period creates different risks from spreading smaller amounts over time. It can quickly impair judgment and raise the chance of poisoning or injury.

Does coffee sober you up?

No. Coffee may make you feel more awake, but it does not lower the amount of alcohol in your blood or restore safe coordination and judgment.

Are alcohol-free drinks completely alcohol-free?

Not always. Definitions and labeling rules differ by location, and some products contain small amounts of alcohol. Check the label if complete avoidance is important for pregnancy, recovery, religious reasons, medicines, or health conditions.

Sources

- National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism - What Is a Standard Drink?
- National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism - Understanding the Dangers of Alcohol Overdose
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention - About Moderate Alcohol Use
- World Health Organization - Alcohol fact sheet
- U.S. Surgeon General - Alcohol and Cancer Risk: 2025 Advisory
- American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists - Alcohol and Women