

Alcohol and Your Health

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Is drinking alcohol good or bad for your health? There is no simple answer. Researchers have found evidence that moderate consumption offers some benefits, especially for your heart. Others insist that alcohol's risks far outweigh any benefits.

Alcohol is produced by fermentation, a process where yeast or bacteria turn the natural sugars found in plant foods into ethanol or pure alcohol. Grains, potatoes, fruits and sugarcane are some of the foods used to make popular alcoholic beverages. Alcohol affects every organ and system of the body. It is rapidly absorbed into the bloodstream and travels to the central nervous system, which controls all bodily functions. Alcohol is a depressant, which means it slows down your brain's activity. The liver breaks down alcohol and clears it out of the body, but it can only do this in small amounts at a time. Meanwhile, the still-unprocessed alcohol continues to affect your brain.

The 2010 Dietary Guidelines for Americans defines three levels of alcohol consumption.

- **Moderate alcohol consumption** is up to 1 drink a day for women and up to 2 drinks a day for men. This is the amount that most adults can safely drink. Moderate consumption may impart some health benefits.
- **Heavy or high-risk drinking** is the consumption of more than 3 drinks on any day or more than 7 per week for women and more than 4 drinks on any day or more than 14 per week for men.
- **Binge drinking** is the consumption within 2 hours of 4 or more drinks for women and 5 or more drinks for men.

A single serving of an alcoholic beverage equals:

- 12 ounces of beer
- 5 ounces of wine, and
- 1.5-ounces or a "shot" of 80-proof distilled spirits or liquor such as gin, vodka or rum

Heavy drinking may lead to risk-taking behavior that can put the health of the drinker and others in immediate danger. Heavy drinkers have higher rates of:

- Motor vehicle accidents
- Drowning, and
- Injuries from falls.



Binge drinking in particular is associated with serious health and social problems; it can cause alcohol poisoning, which can result in loss of consciousness, coma or even death. Binge drinking also increases the risk of sexually transmitted disease, unintended pregnancy and violent crime.

Mixing alcohol with certain medications can cause nausea and vomiting, headache, drowsiness, fainting, difficulty breathing or loss of coordination. Alcohol can make a medication less effective or even useless. Older people are at a higher risk for harmful alcohol–drug interactions because aging slows the body's ability to break down alcohol.

Even some over-the-counter medications and herbal remedies can have harmful effects when combined with alcohol. Talk to your pharmacist or healthcare provider about any concerns or questions you may have.

Excessive alcohol use for months and years also poses significant chronic health problems, including:

- Neurological problems
- Liver disease
- Pancreatitis
- Gastrointestinal problems,
- High blood pressure and cardiovascular problems
- Psychological problems
- Type 2 diabetes and
- Increased risk for certain cancers.

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The National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism estimates that 3 in 10 adults drink at levels that put them at risk for alcoholism, liver disease and other problems. The NIAAA defines alcoholism or alcohol addiction as a chronic disease that includes the following four symptoms:

- Craving or a strong need, or urge, to drink
- Loss of control or not being able to stop drinking once drinking has begun
- Physical dependence and withdrawal symptoms, such as nausea, sweating, shakiness, and anxiety after stopping drinking, and
- Tolerance or the need to drink greater amounts of alcohol to feel its effects.

If you or someone you know is struggling with alcohol abuse or addiction, there is help. Your healthcare provider is a great first step in getting help. They can help identify local programs that can help you. The National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism offers online resources. The National Drug and Alcohol Treatment Referral Routing Service provides a toll-free telephone number, 1-800-662-HELP (4357), where you can speak to a representative about treatment resources in your area.

For people who are healthy, moderate alcohol consumption may offer some benefits to your heart. Research suggests that moderate consumption of alcohol may increase your “good” cholesterol levels, also known as HDL cholesterol. Other research suggests that alcohol may help reduce heart attacks and stroke by reducing blood clotting. Drinking wine, especially red wine, may benefit the heart due to the health-promoting compounds found in grapes.

Despite the possible benefits, the American Heart Association does not recommend that you start drinking if you currently don't. The AHA does not recommend drinking more than the recommended amount because there are known negative effects of drinking on your heart. Alcohol consumption can increase a type of fat in your blood called triglyceride. Excessive drinking can also raise your blood pressure. It should not be forgotten that alcohol also has calories and excess calories in the diet lead to weight gain, and weight is a known risk factor for heart disease.

Alcohol is a carcinogen, which means it is a substance that is capable of causing cancer. The American Cancer Society includes alcoholic beverages in their list of known human carcinogens. Alcohol consumption has been linked to cancers of the liver, mouth, throat, esophagus, colon and breast (in women). The combination of alcohol and tobacco increases the risk of some cancers far more than the independent effects of either drinking or smoking.

For most healthy men and women, alcohol can be safely enjoyed in moderation. However certain people should not drink alcohol at all:

- Women who are pregnant or trying to become pregnant
- People taking certain medications
- Recovering alcoholics
- Anyone planning on driving
- Anyone with a medical condition that can be worsened by alcohol, and
- People who are not of the legal drinking age.

If you have any questions on whether it is safe for you drink, be sure to talk to your doctor.

The recommendations for drinking alcohol are standard across all of the major US health organizations. If you plan on drinking do so in moderation. There is not enough evidence to support drinking for health benefits, so if you don't drink currently, your health is not a reason to start. But for people who are healthy, enjoying an alcoholic beverage once in a while can certainly fit into a healthy diet.