

Alcohol and cancer risk

Consumption of alcoholic drinks is a risk factor for cancer of the mouth, throat (larynx and pharynx), oesophagus, bowel (colon and rectum), liver and female breast.

There is no evidence that drinking alcohol helps protect you from any type of cancer.

Cancer Council recommends that people limit or avoid drinking alcohol.

For people who do drink alcohol, Cancer Council recommends: no more than two standard drinks a day; avoid binge drinking (a single occasion of heavy drinking); and have at least one or two alcohol-free days every week to reduce your risk of cancer.

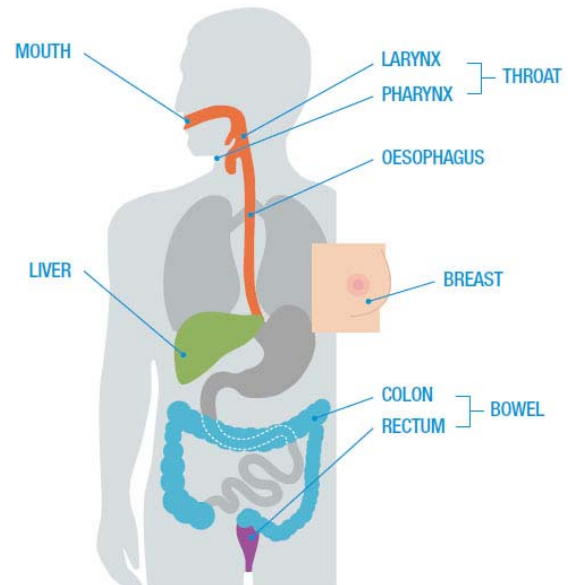
Current evidence

Although alcohol is widely available and widely consumed, in 1988 it was classified by the World Health Organization International Agency for Research on Cancer as a Group 1 carcinogen. This is the highest classification available and means that it is a cause of cancer.¹

Since then, a large body of evidence has consistently shown that consumption of alcoholic drinks is a risk factor for cancer. Drinking alcohol increases the risk of cancers of the mouth, throat (larynx and pharynx), oesophagus, bowel (colon and rectum), liver and female breast.^{2,3,4}

It is not just heavy drinking that increases cancer risk. Even drinking small amounts of alcohol increases the risk of these cancers, but the more you drink, the greater the risk.

Despite some evidence that drinking regular, small amounts of alcohol, such as red wine, may reduce heart disease in older adults, there is no evidence that alcohol helps protect you from any type of cancer.



Your risk of cancer is the same for all types of alcohol including beer, wine and spirits.

Alcohol and cancer in Australia

Australian data suggests that alcohol intake accounts for 5% of the total cancer burden of disease.⁵ It is estimated that 5,070 cases of cancer are attributable to long-term chronic use of alcohol each year in Australia.⁶

Alcohol and smoking

Studies show that the risk of alcohol-related cancers is much higher in people who also smoke.⁷ Compared with non-smoking non-drinkers, the approximate relative risks for developing mouth and throat cancers are up to seven times greater for people who smoke tobacco, up to six times greater for those who drink alcohol, but more than 35 times greater for those who are regular heavy users of both substances (consuming more than four alcoholic drinks and smoking 40 or more cigarettes daily).⁸

How much should I drink?

To reduce the risk of cancer, you should limit your intake of alcohol, or better still, avoid it altogether.

Alcohol affects people differently, therefore there is no amount of alcohol that can be said to be safe for everyone. However for people who do drink alcohol, the Cancer Council recommends no more than two standard drinks a day.

We also recommend that people avoid binge drinking (a single occasion of heavy drinking over a short period of time) and have at least one or two alcohol-free days every week.

What is a standard drink?

In Australia, one standard drink is any drink that contains 10 grams of alcohol. All bottles, cans and casks of alcohol packaged for sale are required by law to state on the label the approximate number of standard drinks they contain.

Container	Amount	Standard drinks
	Light beer (2.7% alcohol)	
1 middy or pot	285ml	0.5 standard drinks
1 can or stubbie	375ml	0.8 standard drinks
	Mid beer (3.5% alcohol)	
1 middy or pot	285ml	0.7 standard drinks
1 can or stubbie	375ml	1 standard drink
	Regular beer (4.8% alcohol)	
1 middy or pot	285ml	1.1 standard drink
1 can or stubbie	375ml	1.4 standard drinks
	Wine (9.5–13% alcohol)	
1 standard serve	100ml	1 standard drink
1 average serve	150ml	1.6 standard drinks
1 bottle	750ml	7-8 standard drinks
	Spirits (40% alcohol)	
1 nip	30ml	1 standard drink
1 bottle	700ml	22 standard drinks
	Premixed spirits (5% alcohol)	
1 can or bottle	375ml	1.5 standard drinks

Note: Some cocktails contain more than three standard drinks. Source: NHMRC, 2009⁹

It can sometimes be difficult to estimate standard drinks in real life situations because:

- glass sizes vary
- people share drinks e.g. jugs, casks, bottles of alcohol
- glasses are topped up by other people
- composition of mixed drinks is not known (cocktails or punch).

Tips for drinking less

If you do drink, there are some ideas to try:

- Alternate alcoholic drinks with non-alcoholic ones like sparkling or plain water (soda, lime and bitters is a great alternative to alcohol).
- Eat some food when you drink alcohol. Think of a glass of wine or beer as something to have with a meal rather than just a drink on its own.
- Dilute alcoholic drinks, for example, try a shandy (beer and lemonade) or white wine and mineral water.
- Choose low-alcohol (or no-alcohol) beer and/or wine.
- Use water to quench your thirst and sip alcoholic drinks slowly.
- Offer to be the designated driver when you go out so that you drink less, but make sure you stay under .05.

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5. Winstanley MH, Pratt IS, Chapman K, Griffin HJ, Croager E, Olver IN, Sinclair C, Slevin T. Alcohol and cancer: a position statement from Cancer Council Australia. MJA. 2011; 194: 479–82.
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