

## Alcohol and cancer risk



Consumption of alcoholic drinks is a risk factor for cancer of the mouth, throat (larynx and pharynx), oesophagus, stomach, 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 to reduce their risk of cancer, people limit their consumption of alcohol.

For people who do choose to drink alcohol, Cancer Council recommends that you only consume alcohol within the National Health and Medical Research Council Guidelines.<sup>1</sup> That means consuming no more than two standard drinks on any day and avoiding binge drinking (a single occasion of heavy drinking of more than four standard drinks).

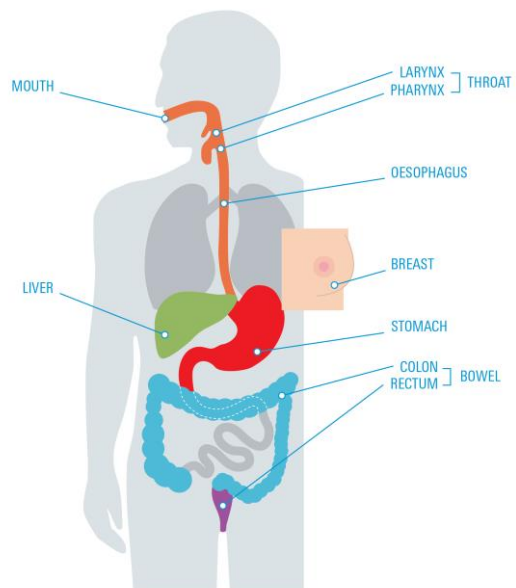
### Current evidence

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.<sup>2</sup>

Since then, a large body of evidence has consistently shown that consumption of alcoholic drinks is a risk factor for cancer. There is convincing evidence that drinking alcohol increases the risk of cancers of the mouth, throat (larynx and pharynx), oesophagus, bowel in men (colon and rectum), liver and female breast. There is probable evidence that alcohol increases the risk of cancers of the stomach and bowel in females.<sup>3 4 5 6</sup>

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.<sup>7</sup> It is estimated that 5,070 cases of cancer are attributable to long-term chronic use of alcohol each year in Australia.<sup>8</sup>

### Alcohol and smoking

Studies show that the risk of alcohol-related cancers is much higher in people who also smoke.<sup>9</sup> 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).<sup>10</sup>

### How much should I drink?

To reduce the risk of cancer, you should limit your intake of alcohol.

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 that they drink only within the NHMRC guidelines for alcohol consumption. That is no more than two standard drinks a day, and no more than four standard drinks on a single occasion.

### 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
 <b>Light beer</b> (2.7% alcohol)		
1 middy or pot	285ml	0.5 standard drinks
1 can or stubbie	375ml	0.8 standard drinks
 <b>Mid beer</b> (3.5% alcohol)		
1 middy or pot	285ml	0.7 standard drinks
1 can or stubbie	375ml	1 standard drink
 <b>Regular beer</b> (4.8% alcohol)		
1 middy or pot	285ml	1.1 standard drink
1 can or stubbie	375ml	1.4 standard drinks
 <b>Wine</b> (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
 <b>Spirits</b> (40% alcohol)		
1 nip	30ml	1 standard drink
1 bottle	700ml	22 standard drinks
 <b>Premixed spirits</b> (5% alcohol)		
1 can or bottle	375ml	1.5 standard drinks

**Note:** Some high-strength pre-mixed cocktails contain more than three standard drinks.<sup>11</sup>

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. World Health Organization. Global Status Report on Alcohol, Geneva, WHO 2014.
6. World Cancer Research Fund International/American Institute for Cancer Research. Continuous Update Project Report: Diet, Nutrition, Physical Activity and Stomach Cancer. 2016. Available at: [wcrf.org/stomach-cancer-2016](http://wcrf.org/stomach-cancer-2016).
7. 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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11. National Health and Medical Research Council, Australian Guidelines to Reduce Health Risks from Drinking Alcohol, 2009, p 145.

