



# Moderate Alcohol Intake

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**Simply Screening , Total Endoscopic Health & Prevention**

The risks of alcohol consumption are not exclusive to alcoholics. Even moderate amounts of drinking can be harmful to your health.

## **How much alcohol does it take to cause harm?**

Most studies report that even moderate amounts of alcohol (one drink per day for women or two drinks a day for men) can increase one's risk of cancer, other illnesses, and death. One drink is equivalent to 5 oz of wine, 12 oz of beer, and 1.5 oz of 90 proof liquor. Alcohol's effects are dose dependant, therefore, the more one drinks, the more one increases the risks of disease. Heavy drinking (greater than 7 drinks per week or drinks in one sitting) is associated with even more health related problems.

Women are more susceptible to alcohol related problems at lower levels of consumption than men. Like men, women who drink are at increased risk for hypertension, liver diseases, and respiratory difficulties. Alcohol related consequences unique to women include breast cancer, gynecologic issues, and fetal alcohol syndrome.

Adverse consequences of alcohol depend upon not only the amount of alcohol consumed, but also an individual characteristics such as weight, age, genetic predisposition, nutritional state, past medical history, and gender. Women are especially vulnerable to alcohol's toxic effects because they have lower levels of gastric alcohol dehydrogenase (the enzyme responsible for the break down of alcohol in the body) as well as more body fat and less water than men. Even after consuming equivalent amounts of alcohol per body weight, women have higher concentrations of alcohol in their blood than men because they have fewer enzymes and lower total body water.

## **What are alcohol's effects on the body?**

**Cardiovascular:** Although alcohol may increase HDL (the good kind of cholesterol), it is also associated with hypertension (high blood pressure), irregular heart beats, dilated cardiomyopathy (enlarged and weakened heart), stroke, and heart failure.

**Liver:** The leading cause of liver disease in Western countries is alcohol consumption. Alcohol can cause hepatic steatosis (fatty liver), alcoholic hepatitis (inflammation of the liver), and cirrhosis (scarring and permanent damage to liver cells). Although fatty liver caused by alcohol and alcoholic hepatitis can be reversed if one stops drinking, cirrhosis is irreversible. Mixing alcohol and over the counter drugs such as acetaminophen (Tylenol) can be toxic to your liver. Those who drink alcohol and are infected with Hepatitis C virus are more likely to develop cirrhosis and cancer at a younger age.

**Cancer:** Alcohol is associated with oral cavity, pharynx, larynx, esophageal, liver, colorectal, and breast cancers. Alcohol can increase women's estrogen levels, therefore, women who are taking hormone replacement therapy and drink alcohol might have an increased risk of breast cancer.

**Gastrointestinal tract:** The toxic effects of alcohol can cause gastritis (inflammation of the stomach) and pancreatitis (inflammation of the pancreas gland). If you take both alcohol and NSAIDS (arthritis medications such as aspirin and ibuprofen), you can increase your risk of gastric ulcers.

**Neurological:** Decreased absorption of nutrients such as vitamin B1 (thiamine) can lead to chronic impaired balance and memory loss.

**Respiratory:** Because alcohol decreases ability of lung cells to fight against bacteria, people who drink alcohol have an increased risk of developing infections such as pneumonia.

**Bones/Joints:** Some studies have found that alcohol is associated with an increased risk of osteoporosis (loss of bone density) in both men and women. Alcohol decreases the body's ability to get rid of uric acid. The uric acid builds up in your joints and they become inflamed (a disease known as gout).

**Fetal alcohol syndrome:** Children born to mothers who drink during pregnancy have increased risks of physical defects (such as low birth weight, cleft palate, deformities of limbs and fingers, heart defects, problems with vision and hearing, and very small heads and brains), as well life long behavioral problems (such as hyperactivity, decreased attention span, low IQ).

Fetal alcohol syndrome causes the most common type of preventable mental retardation in the United States. Because doctors and researchers don't know how much alcohol it takes to cause alcohol related birth defects, *the only absolute way to avoid them is not to drink any alcohol while you are pregnant.*

### **Beyond your organ systems, how else can alcohol adversely effect you?**

**Sleep:** Although alcohol may help you fall asleep, drinking decreases the amount of deep sleep one can achieve and increases early morning awakenings (especially to urinate), therefore, you are less rested.

**Injuries:** Just one drink doubles your risk of injury. Injuries can occur from falls, violence, or automobile accidents. Although the legal blood alcohol limit to drive is 0.08, less than 2 drinks can impair your ability to drive by decreasing your coordination and reaction time. Alcohol is involved in over half of all automobile fatalities.

### **How can you tell if you or someone you know has a drinking problem?**

Alcoholism is not only about the amount one drinks, but also the effects alcohol has on one's life. Failure to fulfill major work or school responsibilities, repeated alcohol related legal problems (such as being arrested for driving under the influence or for physically hurting another person while intoxicated), drinking in physically dangerous situations (such as driving a car), increased violent acts, or continued drinking despite familial and relationship problems related to drinking, may indicate that the person drinking is a problem.

A common test to determine if someone has a drinking problem is the "CAGE" test. A "yes" to one or more of the 4 questions suggests a possible alcohol problem.

1. Have you ever felt the urge to **C**ut down?
2. Have people **A**nnoyed you by criticizing your drinking?
3. Have you ever felt **G**uilty about your drinking?
4. Have you ever had an **E**ye opener (a drink first thing in the morning to steady your nerves or get rid of a hangover?)

### **What resources are available?**

If you or someone you may have alcohol issues and would like more information or support, talk to your doctor. You don't have to be an "alcoholic" to use the following resources, (many of the websites provide information about the effects of alcohol on your health and links to other helpful sites):

**National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence (NCADD)** Provides local telephone numbers for counseling, help and information. 1-800-NCA-CALL [www.ncadd.org](http://www.ncadd.org)

**Alcoholics Anonymous (AA)** Call the Tidewater Intergroup Office for times and locations. Meetings are held 7 days a week. Locations include Chesapeake, Norfolk, Portsmouth, Suffolk, and Virginia Beach 1-757-490-3980 24 hours a day [www.alcoholics-anonymous.org](http://www.alcoholics-anonymous.org)

**Al-Anon** Support groups for significant other of alcoholics. Can refer you to **Alateen**, a support group for children of alcoholics. 1-888-4AL-ANON Monday – Friday 8 am – 6 pm 1-757-499-1443 [www.al-anon-alateen.org](http://www.al-anon-alateen.org)

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