

Education

Alcohol: Effects on Health

Is alcohol harmful?

Drinking alcohol is very common in our society. However, alcohol can affect your health. Some people should not drink at all. You should not drink alcohol if you:

- cannot limit your drinking to low or moderate levels
- plan to drive, operate machinery, or do anything that requires you to be alert and coordinated
- have certain medical conditions
- take medicines that interact with alcohol.

If you drink too much alcohol, you risk having physical and mental health problems. This is especially true for older adults, who often have other medical problems.

What physical problems does alcohol cause?

Alcohol can affect your body in the following ways:

- Alcohol increases the acid in your stomach. The irritating effects of alcohol may cause gastritis (inflammation of the lining of the stomach), pancreatitis (inflammation of the pancreas), or a peptic ulcer (a raw area in the lining of the stomach or intestines). Alcohol can also damage your small intestine and keep it from absorbing nutrients.
- Alcohol can keep you from getting deep sleep, which may mean a less restful night's sleep. Also, drinking alcohol can make insomnia worse. Although it may help you go to sleep, when the drink wears off you may wake up earlier. You may also wake up more often to urinate.
- Alcohol can cause gout because it can keep your body from getting rid of uric acid. Gout is a buildup of uric acid that causes inflammation in your joints.
- Drinking too much alcohol puts you at higher risk for cancer of the pancreas, mouth, tongue, and throat. This risk is even greater if you also use tobacco products.
- Alcohol may cause liver cancer, fatty liver, hepatitis, cirrhosis, and other liver disease.
- Drinking too much alcohol makes you lose protein, minerals, and vitamins. Alcohol affects thiamine (vitamin B-1) in particular. Your nerves, muscles, heart, and brain need thiamine to work normally. Lack of thiamine can cause problems with short-term memory, eye movement, walking, cramps, numbness, tingling, and weakness in your legs and hands.
- Drinking too much alcohol also may be part of what causes high blood pressure and strokes. Alcohol can lead to heart muscle disease or heart failure.
- Fetal alcohol syndrome occurs when a woman drinks alcohol while she is pregnant. Drinking may cause problems in the baby that show up after birth. Also, women who drink may be at higher risk of having miscarriages, premature births, stillbirths, and low-birth-weight babies. The more you drink, the greater the danger to the baby. Women who have 1 or more drinks every week are much more likely to have children with FAS than women who seldom drink during pregnancy. Many doctors advise women not to drink any alcohol while trying to become pregnant, during pregnancy, or while breast-feeding.

Alcohol can also cause:

- increased blood sugar levels, which makes diabetes worse
- interactions with medicines
- worsening of most other medical problems (heart disease, kidney disease, circulation problems)
- injuries from falls and other accidents.

What mental health problems does alcohol cause?

When you drink too much alcohol, you lose proper judgment. When you drink heavily you can have changes in moods and emotions. You may be very angry and irritable. You can have personality changes, such as becoming suspicious, jealous, or possessive. Your loved ones find it hard to cope with these outbursts and changes. As drinking problems become worse, you may argue or fight at home, at work, and in social settings. This can lead to domestic violence, child abuse, and losing your job and friends. Your children are at high risk of becoming alcoholics as adults.

Alcohol can worsen other mental health problems such as anxiety, bipolar disorder, posttraumatic stress disorder, and schizophrenia.

Regularly drinking too much alcohol also can cause major, even life-threatening, mental, emotional, and behavioral problems including:

- anxiety
- depression
- confusion (both short-term and permanent)
- addiction.

Many violent crimes, such as sexual abuse, assault, and murders are related to alcohol abuse. Drunk drivers cause about half the deaths from vehicle accidents in the US.

How much is too much?

Moderate drinking is no more than 1 drink per day for women and no more than 2 drinks per day for men. The differences between women and men are based on body size and the way their bodies change food into energy. Examples of 1 drink are:

- 12 ounces of beer
- 5 ounces of wine
- 1.5 ounces of 80-proof distilled spirits such as whiskey or vodka.

Before you choose to drink alcoholic beverages, even in moderate amounts, talk with your health care provider. Your provider can help you determine what is best for your health.

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