

Alcohol and Your Health

People drink alcohol for many reasons. While a moderate amount may have some health benefits, there are also risks. The effects of alcohol vary from person to person and depend on many things, such as:

- How much you drink
- How often you drink
- Your age
- Your health status
- Your family history

What happens when I drink?

Alcohol enters your blood quickly. Its effects can be seen within 10 minutes. As you drink more, your blood alcohol concentration (BAC) goes up. Your BAC is how much alcohol is in your blood. If you drink a lot for a long time, it can be harmful to your health. There are increased risks for alcoholism, accidents, cancer and other health problems.

How does drinking affect my health?

Over time, drinking can affect your whole body.

- **Brain:** The way your brain looks and works may change. This can impact your mood, how you act, make it harder to think clearly and move with coordination.
- **Heart:** It can harm the muscles and vessels of your heart. It can lead to health problems such as an enlarged heart, stroke, high blood pressure, high triglycerides, heart failure or abnormal heart rhythms.
- **Liver:** It can lead to problems such as fatty liver, fibrosis or cirrhosis.
- **Pancreas:** It can cause inflammation in your pancreas.
- **Cancer:** If you drink too much and for too long, it can lead to cancer. It

can lead to head, neck, liver, esophageal, breast and colorectal cancers.

- **Immune System:** Your immune system may get weak. Your risk for infection or illness may increase.
- **Fetal Alcohol Syndrome:** This happens when drinking while pregnant. No amount of alcohol is safe while pregnant. It can cause fetal brain damage which can show up any time in childhood.

What is a standard drink?

One standard drink has about 14 grams or about 1 ounce of pure alcohol. Each of these listed below are a standard drink:

- 12 fl oz regular beer (5% alcohol)
- 8-9 fl oz of malt liquor (7% alcohol)
- 5 fl oz of table wine (12% alcohol)
- 3-4 fl oz of fortified wine such as sherry or port (17% alcohol)
- 2-3 fl oz cordial, liqueur, or aperitif (24% alcohol)
- 1.5 fl oz distilled spirits (gin, rum, tequila, vodka, whiskey), brandy and cognac (40% alcohol)
- 1 fl oz 100% proof spirit (> 40% alcohol)

Different types of beer, wine, or malt liquor have different alcohol contents. For instance, light beers have almost as much alcohol as regular beer. To find out how much alcohol is in the cocktails you drink, go to:

<https://www.rethinkingdrinking.niaaa.nih.gov/Tools/Calculators/Default.aspx>

How much is too much drinking?

Light: Any amount less than the moderate category.

Moderate: No more than 1-2 standard drinks/day for men and 1 standard drink/day for women.

Heavy: 15 or more standard drinks/week for men and 8 or more standard drinks/week for women.

Binge: 5 or more drinks for men and 4 or more drinks for women on a single occasion.

If I do drink, how much is safe?

If you drink, you should limit yourself to no more than 1 drink (women) or 2 drinks (men) per day. Less may be safer, based on your risks.

Are there benefits?

Alcohol may be helpful for heart health. Moderate amounts can increase HDL (good) cholesterol levels. But, this has not been proven. Routine exercise and weight loss (if you are overweight) are better ways to raise HDL cholesterol. **We do not suggest drinking to help your heart health.**

Is red wine better for heart health than other drinks?

Some red wines and dark beers have high levels of flavonoids and antioxidants.

Flavonoids may stop platelets in the blood from sticking and help blood vessels relax.

Antioxidants help to fight free radicals. Free radicals can harm your blood vessels.

Grape skin and red grape juice have high levels of flavonoids and antioxidants that protect the heart. If you eat a balanced diet (fruits, vegetables, and whole grains) you can get the same benefits without alcohol.

You should drink less alcohol or no alcohol at all if you:

- Are on Warfarin (Coumadin®)
- Have high triglycerides (a type of fat in the blood)
- Have high blood pressure
- Have abnormal heart rhythms
- Have other health problems

If I don't drink alcohol, should I start?

No. If you do not drink, you should not start just for the sake of your heart. Talk with your doctor about the benefits and risks of drinking a moderate amount.

The best way to lower your risk of chronic disease is to be active and eat healthy. This can't be replaced with wine or other alcohol.

Does alcohol benefit people with diabetes?

No. There is no data to support this. Drinking can lower blood sugars to an unsafe level. If you have diabetes, we advise that you drink alcohol with a meal and in moderation.

Who to Call

If you are a UW Health patient and have more questions, please call UW Health at the phone number below. You can also visit our website at www.uwhealth.org/nutrition.

Nutrition clinics for UW Hospital and Clinics (UWHC) and American Family Children's Hospital (AFCH) can be reached at **(608) 890-5500**.

Calorie, Alcohol and Carbohydrate Content of Some Alcoholic Drinks

	Serving Size	Alcohol, grams	Carbohydrate, grams	Calories
Regular beer	12 oz	13	13	150
Light beer	12 oz	11	5	100
Nonalcoholic beer	12 oz	0	13	65
Wine—red, white, rose	4 oz	11	2	80
Wine—sweet dessert	2 oz	9	7	90
Gin, rum, whiskey, vodka, 80 proof	1.5 oz jigger	14	0	100
Gin, rum, whiskey, vodka, 100 proof	1 oz	12	0	82
Martini	2.5 oz	22	0	160
Margarita	8 oz.	14	34	270
Bloody Mary	10 oz.	13.2	6	125
Whiskey sour	3.5 oz	15	14	160
Pina colada	4.5 oz	14	32	250

Your health care team may have given you this information as part of your care. If so, please use it and call if you have any questions. If this information was not given to you as part of your care, please check with your doctor. This is not medical advice. This is not to be used for diagnosis or treatment of any medical condition. Because each person's health needs are different, you should talk with your doctor or others on your health care team when using this information. If you have an emergency, please call 911. Copyright © 2/2023 University of Wisconsin Hospitals and Clinics Authority. All rights reserved. Produced by the Department of Nursing. HF#614.