

Cut back on alcohol to reduce your cancer risk

Is there a link between alcohol and cancer risk?

Yes. When it comes to cancer risk, there are no 'safe' alcohol limits. But most cancers caused by alcohol occur when you drink over the recommended limits.

The risk of getting cancer from alcohol is more affected by the amount you drink rather than the kind of alcohol you drink. The more you drink, the greater the risk. All alcoholic drinks increase your cancer risk.

You increase your risk of cancer if you start to drink early in life, or if you keep drinking over a long period of time, or if you drink heavily.

What cancers are caused by alcohol?

Alcohol can cause cancer of the mouth, throat (pharynx), voice box (larynx) and gullet (oesophagus). It can also cause cancer of the breast, large bowel (colorectum) and the liver.

How many cancers are caused by alcohol in Ireland?

Around 1,000 cancers diagnosed in Ireland every year are caused by alcohol. Overall, 10% of all cancers in men and 3% in women are caused by alcohol.

Is the risk the same for all cancers?

No. The risk of getting cancer from alcohol varies for different cancers. Alcohol impacts more on cancers of the mouth, throat and digestive system. For example:

- Five drinks a day increases the risk of mouth, throat and digestive system cancers by over 100%.
- Two drinks a day increases the risk of bowel cancer by between 10% and 20%;
- One drink a day increases the risk of breast cancer by 7%.

How does alcohol cause cancer?

Alcohol is broken down in the body to a chemical called acetylaldehyde.

(Sounds like '*a seat ill alda hide*'). Acetylaldehyde is a 'carcinogen' which is a cancer causing chemical.

Alcohol also works in other ways to increase cancer risk:

- It increases hormone levels (oestrogen) in the body and this might increase the risk of breast cancer.
- It helps carcinogens to be more easily absorbed by the mouth and throat. For example, in people who smoke and drink, alcohol allows the carcinogens in cigarettes to be easily absorbed. This is why smokers who drink alcohol have a much greater risk of getting cancer of the mouth, throat, voice box (larynx), gullet (oesophagus) and so on. Smoking and drinking is linked with 70% of these cancers.
- It causes liver disease (cirrhosis) which might lead to liver cancer.
- It has a lot of calories which can lead to weight gain. Being overweight or obese increases cancer risk.

How can I reduce my risk?

Avoiding alcohol altogether or drinking within the recommended limits will greatly reduce your risk of getting cancer.

What are the recommended limits?

The Department of Health has set low-risk drinking guidelines for adults. The weekly limits for adults are:

- up to 11 standard drinks a week for women,
- up to 17 standard drinks a week for men.

What is a standard drink?

In Ireland, a standard alcoholic drink contains about 10 grams of pure alcohol. A standard drink is:

- a small glass of wine (100 ml, 12.5% volume),
(a bottle of wine at 12.5% alcohol contains around seven standard drinks)
- a pub measure of spirits (35.5 ml),
- a half pint of beer or lager (284 ml),
- an alcopop (275 ml bottle).

A standard drink (SD) measure



Your liver can only remove about one standard drink per hour.

Is there anything else I should know?

- Try to stay within the recommended limits and try to spread the amount you drink over the whole week.
- Less is best when it comes to cancer risk. The best advice is to limit your intake to no more than two drinks a day for men and one drink a day for women.
- Try to have at least two or three alcohol-free days in the week.
- Don't smoke: People who drink alcohol are more likely to be smokers and smokers who drink heavily tend to smoke more. Smoking and drinking together greatly increase your cancer risk.

Do these limits also apply to people at higher risk of cancer?

No. These limits apply to the general population. Some people are at higher risk of cancer than others. For example, you might have a strong family history of cancer or you might have had cancer in the past. Your risk is higher, therefore, than someone without the family history or previous illness. You might consider avoiding alcohol altogether or cutting back to around three standard drinks a week.

Some people have a higher risk of cancer for other reasons. For example, if you have hepatitis B or C, you have a higher risk of liver cancer. For this reason, you should avoid alcohol.

Useful websites:

- For general information on alcohol go to www.yourdrinking.ie
- For HSE drug and alcohol information and support go to www.drugs.ie



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