



Safe Alcohol Use

Drinking Responsibly for Your Health and Safety

For the past few decades, it's been widely circulated that moderate alcohol use was meant to have certain health benefits, particularly an improvement in cardiovascular health. And beyond that, casual drinking in a social environment is a commonplace activity for adults, especially during get-togethers during the holiday season! However, while alcohol consumption is commonplace, that doesn't mean that it's always safe. In fact, emerging research even suggests that the older science supporting the health benefits of moderate drinking may not have been entirely accurate. But is there still a way to drink alcohol safely and responsibly? This month's health tips will discuss how to drink alcohol safely, detailing what constitutes a "safe" limit for alcohol use, the health effects of alcohol use, who should avoid alcohol whenever possible and why, and some resources for what to do if you or someone you know may have an alcohol dependency.

The Basics of Alcohol

Alcohol (ethyl alcohol, or ethanol) is an intoxicant. Specifically, it's what is referred to as a central nervous system depressant. This means that it will reduce reaction time, impair your judgment, reduce your motor skills and balance, and at higher levels can even slur or impede speech. Alcohol can frequently make you *feel* warm by diluting your blood vessels, but in reality, your body tends to lose heat quickly after you've had a few drinks.

While these effects can be minor with limited consumption, the CDC estimates that excessive alcohol use contributes to over 140,000 deaths per year in the United States. Alcohol consumption can lead to an increased risk of injury and accidents, precisely because it impairs your motor control and reaction time. Things like car accidents, falls, drownings, or injuries become much harder to avoid when under the influence.

But is there a "safe" limit to drinking? That's a harder question to answer than it might seem. Former research seemed to imply that some moderate drinking might have certain health benefits. However, with the benefit of more thorough research, it seems like these positive effects may have actually been caused by other, more complicated factors. In fact, the truth is that the less you drink, the less your risk for alcohol's negative health impacts. And if you don't drink, there is no reason to start from a health point of view. In other words, you're better off not drinking than starting to drink. But even still, there are some facts about what constitutes "moderate" or "safe" alcohol consumption:

- In the US, a "standard drink" is about 0.6 ounces of pure alcohol. That's 14 grams or about 1.2 tablespoons.
 - This amount can be found in: 12-ounces of beer (5% alcohol), 8-ounces of malt liquor (7% alcohol), 5-ounces of wine (12% alcohol), or 1.5-ounces of distilled spirits (40% alcohol content).
- According to the *Dietary Guidelines for Americans*, adults of legal drinking age (21 or older) can have 2 or less standard drinks per day if they are male, or 1 standard drink per day if they are female.
 - This is because, *on average*, men are slightly larger in height and weight. However, these are average trends, and thus these are general guidelines. Alcohol can affect everyone a little differently.
- The same *Dietary Guidelines* also suggest that not drinking at all is an entirely valid option. In fact, it's the *Guideline* that suggests that adults who choose not to drink shouldn't start drinking for any reason.
- The general rule is: the less you drink, the better it is for your health.

US Standard Drink Sizes



12 ounces
5% ABV beer



8 ounces
7% ABV malt liquor



5 ounces
12% ABV wine



1.5 ounces
40% (80 proof)
ABV distilled spirits
(gin, rum, vodka,
whiskey, etc.)

ABV = Alcohol by Volume

The Health Effects of Alcohol

Typically, alcohol's effects become more pronounced the more of it you have. Your liver, which is responsible for processing the alcohol in your body, can only safely process so much at a time, leaving the rest to continue to circulate throughout your body. It can take time for those effects to wear off, and the more you drink, the longer it will take.

But what are those effects, specifically? These can be divided into short-term and long-term effects. In the short term, excessive alcohol use can result in:

- Increased risk for accidents such as driving accidents, drowning, burns, injuries, and falls.
- Increased risk of violence, including homicide, sexual assault, and domestic violence.
- At high blood-alcohol levels, alcohol poisoning can occur, which can lead to coma or even death if untreated.
- Increased risk of risky sexual behavior, such as unprotected sex, which might lead to a higher risk of contracting sexually transmitted infections.
- Miscarriage, stillbirth, and developmental complications for children of women who are pregnant while drinking.



In the long term, excessive alcohol consumption can contribute to:

- Increased risk of cardiovascular disease such as stroke, high blood pressure, and heart disease.
- Liver disease and digestive problems.
- Various forms of cancer, particularly of the throat, mouth, breast, esophagus, voice box, liver, colon, and rectum.
- Weakening of your immune system.
- Learning and memory problems.
- Increased risk for depression and anxiety.
- Social problems such as family and work-related issues, the latter of which might lead to unemployment.
- Alcohol dependency.

When Should You NOT Drink?

While alcohol consumption following the recommendations set out in the *Dietary Guidelines for Americans* is typically safe, that's not always true, and it's also not true for everyone. So here are some general guidelines about when drinking any amount, even the minimums listed in the *Guidelines*, may be unsafe:

- Anyone under the age of 21 should not drink.
- People who are pregnant or breastfeeding should avoid alcohol.
- Before driving or when planning to drive, avoid alcohol.
- Make sure to check with your pharmacist when taking certain prescription medications. Some medications react very badly with alcohol and can lead to serious complications.
- People over the age of 65 should not drink as much alcohol, since their bodies process it differently (so only 1 standard drink a day for men, and less than one for women).
- Those suffering from certain medical conditions may be particularly sensitive to alcohol and should avoid it.
- Those recovering from alcohol dependency or otherwise have trouble controlling their intake should avoid alcohol.
- Finally, check with your primary care physician before changing your alcohol habits (particularly if those habits are to increase how much you drink) so that they can advise you.

Excessive Alcohol Consumption and Alcohol Dependency

Not all excessive drinking will lead to alcohol dependency. In fact, studies show that an overwhelming majority of adults that engage in excessive drinking do not develop alcohol dependency. However, some do, and alcohol dependency can dramatically disrupt your day-to-day life. Before we continue, it might be valuable to define what we mean by excessive drinking.

- Binge drinking is a type of excessive drinking where a person drinks too much on one occasion, or 5+ standard drinks in one occasion for men and 4+ standard drinks in one occasion for women.
- Heavy drinking refers to persist patterns of excessive drinking, usually counted as 15 or more standard drinks per week for men and 8 or more standard drinks per week for women.

Alcohol dependency, or more formally called Alcohol Use Disorder (or AUD), is a medical and psychiatric condition that causes difficulty in controlling alcohol intake to the point where it can disrupt your life, your job, or your relationships with friends and family. While not all adults who drink in excess develop AUD, the more often you engage in excessive alcohol use, the higher the risk becomes. Additionally, the following people are at higher risk for developing AUD:

- People who start drinking at an earlier age are more likely to suffer from AUD.
- People who have a family history of AUD are more likely to develop AUD. This is both because of genetics, and because parents can model behavior for their children and relatives in early childhood, which can increase the risk of AUD.
- People with other mental health issues, such as depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, and even ADHD have an increased risk for developing AUD. This is likewise true for those who experienced childhood trauma.



While none of the above conditions are guarantees, they do contribute to an increased risk. If you fall into one of these categories, it might be helpful to be mindful of alcohol consumption, and to discuss any worrying symptoms with your physician. The good news is that AUD is treatable through a combination of medication, behavioral therapy, and community support. If you have experienced any of the following symptoms in the past year, you should strongly consider speaking with your health care provider:

- Difficulty controlling or cutting down on drinking.
- Frequently drinking more or for longer than you intended.
- Drinking that leads to disruptions in day-to-day life, such as troubles at work or at home.
- Difficulty reducing your drinking even when it leads to the above or exacerbates symptoms like depression or anxiety.
- Cutting back on activities you used to find enjoyable so you can focus on drinking.
- Being unable to focus on other things because of thoughts of needing to drink.
- Finding that you must drink more and more to notice the effects you want.
- Withdrawal symptoms when you cut back on drinking, such as trouble sleeping, shakiness, nausea, sweating, racing heart, feeling unhappy, general sense of unease or poor health, sensing things that aren't there, and/or seizures.
- Drinking in situations where drinking increases your risk of injury (such as before driving or swimming).

The more of these symptoms you have, the more urgently change may be needed to reduce your risk of serious illness or injury. Call your health care provider for resources and consider looking over the resources in the References section below.

References

Massachusetts Infosheet for Moderate Drinking - mass.gov/info-details/moderate-drinking

National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, AUD Factsheet - niaaa.nih.gov/publications/brochures-and-fact-sheets/understanding-alcohol-use-disorder

General CDC Page for Alcohol - cdc.gov/alcohol/index.htm

CDC Anonymous Check Your Drinking Tool - cdc.gov/alcohol/CheckYourDrinking/index.html

Resources

National Drug and Alcohol Treatment Referral Routing Service – 1-800-662-4357

Massachusetts Substance Abuse Helpline – 800-327-5050

Suicide and Crisis Hotline – 988

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Treatment Search - findtreatment.gov/