

Alcohol & Cancer

You asked. We've answered.

Does alcohol use really cause cancer?

Yes. Alcohol increases your risk for at least [seven types of cancer](#):

- › mouth
- › throat
- › voice box
- › esophagus
- › liver
- › colorectal
- › female breast

Alcohol [may be a risk factor](#) for other cancers, as well, such as pancreatic, gastric, and lung cancer, but more research is needed.

How much do I need to drink to raise my cancer risk?

Any amount of alcohol—[even low levels of drinking](#)—increases your risk for cancer. But the *more* you drink and the *longer* you drink, the higher your risk. This is [especially true](#) for head and neck cancers.

Is alcohol as important as other cancer risk factors?

Yes. [Alcohol use has a greater effect](#) on your cancer risk than occupational hazards, UV radiation, or protective behaviors like physical exercise and breastfeeding (while tobacco use, diet, and obesity are greater risk factors).

Does the type of alcohol I drink matter?

No. The type of alcohol you drink—wine, beer, or liquor—[does not matter](#) when it comes to cancer risk.

How exactly does alcohol cause cancer?

Researchers have identified [many ways](#) alcohol can cause cancer.

FOR EXAMPLE:

- › When alcohol breaks down in your body, the process produces something called acetaldehyde, which is a carcinogen.
- › Alcohol can impair your body's ability to break down and absorb certain nutrients associated with cancer risk.
- › For women, alcohol can increase your body's levels of estrogen, which has links to breast cancer.

NOTE: If you smoke *and* drink, your [cancer risk is greater](#) than for people who only smoke *or* drink.



›› Only 30% of Americans know [alcohol use](#) can cause cancer, according to a [recent study](#). The damaging effects of drinking can get obscured in Wisconsin's [alcohol-friendly environment](#), and the facts can be hard to parse—what does “heavy drinking” mean? How much is a “drink” anyway?

Here we offer straightforward answers to your questions.

- ›› For more information: Wisconsin Cancer Collaborative info@wicancer.org
wicancer.org
[Facebook.com/WisconsinCancer](https://www.facebook.com/WisconsinCancer)
[Twitter.com/WisconsinCancer](https://twitter.com/WisconsinCancer)

Together, we will reduce the burden of cancer for everyone in Wisconsin.

›› Alcohol use contributes to about [3.5% of all cancer deaths](#) and 15% of breast cancer deaths in the US.

Did you know? More than [30% of adults](#) in Wisconsin do **not** drink regularly.

This FAQ is optimized for online use. To access hyperlinks and sources, please view the online version at

wicancer.org/AlcoholFAQ



But red wine is good for my heart, right?

Some past studies have shown a relationship between red wine and decreased heart disease risk. But researchers believe this relationship likely [has been overstated](#). The connection may be explained by other lifestyle factors, such as increased physical activity among wine drinkers. The American Heart Association [does not recommend](#) drinking wine to gain these benefits. And heavy drinking can lead to serious heart problems!

What can I do to decrease my cancer risk?

Drink less! And avoid [excessive drinking](#) (learn more in the box at right). If you don't drink, don't start. If you do choose to drink, [experts recommend](#) you do so only occasionally: no more than one drink per day for women; no more than two drinks per day for men.

Think you may be drinking too much? Consider ways to [cut down or quit](#). Concerned about your cancer risk? Start by talking with your health care provider.

What is "a drink"?

In the US, [one standard drink](#) is defined as:



["Excessive drinking"](#) includes **heavy drinking** & **binge drinking**.



For WOMEN:

Heavy drinking is 8+ drinks per week

Binge drinking is 4+ drinks in 2-3 hours



For MEN:

Heavy drinking is 15+ drinks per week

Binge drinking is 5+ drinks in 2-3 hours

Alcoholic beverages can be packaged or sold in larger sizes or with higher alcohol content, and may be considered more than one drink.

If I stop drinking, will my level of cancer risk return to that of a non-drinker?

Yes. Researchers believe the risk of alcohol-associated cancers returns to that of a non-drinker after about 20 years of sobriety.

What can I do to decrease alcohol-related cancers in my community?

You can [create environments](#) that discourage excessive drinking and support healthy decisions about alcohol.

This happens when alcohol is less **available**, less **attractive**, and less **affordable**, and when excessive drinking is less **acceptable**.

Families, communities, and policy-makers [all have a role](#) in making this happen.

FOR EXAMPLE:

- › **Parents** can [set a positive example](#) by always giving guests a non-alcoholic option at gatherings in the home.
- › **Community groups** planning [local festivals and events](#) can use smaller cup sizes and can place limits on the number of beverages that can be purchased at one time.
- › **Cities and towns** can limit the number of locations that sell alcohol ("[alcohol outlet density](#)") & support Wisconsin's [new social host law](#) that makes it illegal to provide a location for underage drinking.
- › **State lawmakers** can [increase the price of alcohol](#) and keep the minimum legal drinking age of 21.

» Bottom line.

Alcohol can cause cancer. What can **you** do? » [Cut back or quit](#). » Start a conversation with your friends and family. » Encourage your community to change its alcohol environment.

Follow the Wisconsin Cancer Collaborative online to learn more:
[Facebook.com/WisconsinCancer](https://www.facebook.com/WisconsinCancer) and [Twitter.com/WisconsinCancer](https://www.twitter.com/WisconsinCancer)