

For many of us, having an alcoholic drink while out with friends and family, or at home after a busy day, is a normal part of everyday life. People drink for many different reasons – alcohol can change our mood, often helping us to relax and unwind.

Whatever the reasons are, it can be easy to drink much more than we realise. And, while we all know the immediate effects of drinking alcohol, we often don't consider the longer term health risks.

Think before you drink

WCRF UK recommends that, if consumed at all, we limit alcoholic drinks to no more than two for men and one for women a day. This

Recommendation appears

in WCRF UK's Expert Report, *Food, Nutrition, Physical Activity, and the Prevention of Cancer: a Global Perspective*.

The Expert Report reviewed all of the available evidence on diet, physical activity and weight management in relation to cancer risk and produced 10 Recommendations for Cancer Prevention. If we all followed these Recommendations, experts estimate that about a third of the most common cancers could be prevented.



*This leaflet focuses on the alcohol Recommendation: **If consumed at all, limit alcoholic drinks to 2 for men and 1 for women a day***

What is alcohol?

The chemical name for alcohol is ethanol. It is made by fermenting plant sugars with yeast. This produces alcohol and a gas called carbon dioxide.



There are many different types of alcoholic drinks. Most fall into one of three groups: beers, wines and spirits.

People often talk about alcohol in terms of 'units'.

- ◆ **One unit contains 8g (10ml) of pure alcohol**
- ◆ **The percentage of alcohol by volume (ABV) tells us how many units of pure alcohol there are in one litre of the drink**

For example, one litre (1000ml) of white wine with 12% ABV contains 12 units. Therefore:

- ◆ A standard bottle (750ml) of wine contains nine units
- ◆ A large glass (250ml) of wine contains three units

It takes about an hour for a healthy liver to break down and remove one unit of alcohol.

What is a 'drink'?

WCRF UK's alcohol Recommendation aims to make things easier by talking in terms of drinks rather than units. **As a rough guide, a 'drink' contains about 10-15 grams of alcohol**, so one drink is roughly the same as:

- ◆ Half a pint of normal strength (3-5% ABV) beer, lager or cider
- ◆ One 25ml measure of spirits (40% ABV), such as vodka or whisky
- ◆ One small glass (125ml) of wine (12-13% ABV)



It's important to remember that drinks contain different amounts of alcohol depending on their size and strength. In recent years, serving sizes and the strength of alcoholic drinks such as wine have increased.

What is the link with cancer?

- ◆ There is convincing evidence that alcohol increases the risk of cancer of the oesophagus, mouth, throat (pharynx and larynx) and breast, as well as bowel cancer in men. It also probably increases the risk of liver cancer, and bowel cancer in women.
- ◆ Research shows that **alcohol is particularly harmful when combined with smoking**, especially for oesophageal, mouth and throat cancer.
- ◆ Bowel and breast cancer are two of the most common cancers in the UK. Experts estimate that about 43 per cent of bowel cancer and about 42 per cent of breast cancer could be prevented by not drinking alcohol, together with having a healthy diet, being physically active and maintaining a healthy weight.

How does alcohol cause cancer?

Researchers are still looking into the reasons why alcohol may cause cancer. When our bodies break down alcohol, it can damage the DNA in our cells. It also produces cancer-causing compounds and raises levels of some hormones, such as oestrogen, all of which can increase cancer risk.

Are there any health benefits to drinking alcohol?

To help prevent cancer, it's best we don't drink any alcohol. However, some evidence suggests that small amounts of alcohol may have a protective effect on the heart, but the benefits only outweigh the risks in those particularly at risk of heart disease, such as men aged over 40 and postmenopausal women. This is why WCRF UK recommends that if you do consume alcohol, you stick to no more than two drinks a day for men and one drink a day for women.



Heavy drinking, or binge drinking, is particularly bad for our health, even if only done occasionally. It is also linked to high blood pressure.

Benefits of cutting down on alcohol

As well as reducing your risk of cancer and other diseases, by cutting down you can:

Save money – alcohol can add a substantial amount to your shopping bill and to an evening out.

Improve mental health – alcohol is a depressant and regular heavy drinking can cause psychological and emotional problems.

Prevent hangovers – a heavy drinking session leads to dehydration and low blood sugar levels, which cause some of the symptoms of a hangover.

Sleep better – alcohol interferes with your natural sleep patterns.

Lose weight – alcohol is high in calories and also increases your appetite.



Alcohol and weight gain

Alcohol is high in calories but it has little nutritional benefit. People often refer to alcohol as providing 'empty calories'. It is easy to consume many calories from alcohol without realising it, which can lead to weight gain.

For example, a pint of ordinary strength beer or lager contains about 250 calories, a small glass (125ml) of 12% ABV wine contains about 85 calories and a standard measure of whisky contains about 50 calories.



Cutting down on the amount you drink could play an important role in helping you to lose weight or maintain a healthy weight, and so further reduce your cancer risk.

Tips for sensible drinking

- ◆ When ordering drinks, opt for the smallest serving size. All licensed premises now have to offer small glasses of wine and single measures of spirits. Avoid double measures of spirits, which are often encouraged as 'better value'.
- ◆ Don't drink alcohol when you are thirsty because you are likely to drink more. Have a glass of water or a non-alcoholic soft drink to quench your thirst before having an alcoholic drink.
- ◆ Alternate between alcoholic and soft drinks.
- ◆ Sip your drink slowly to pace yourself and make it last longer.
- ◆ Dilute alcoholic drinks or opt for low calorie/low alcohol alternatives. For example, opt for a white wine spritzer with soda water rather than a full glass of wine.
- ◆ Aim to keep at least a few nights each week alcohol free.
- ◆ Avoid drinking on an empty stomach. The alcohol will be absorbed into the bloodstream more quickly.
- ◆ Make sure you drink water before and after you drink alcohol to rehydrate yourself.



Where to find out more or get support

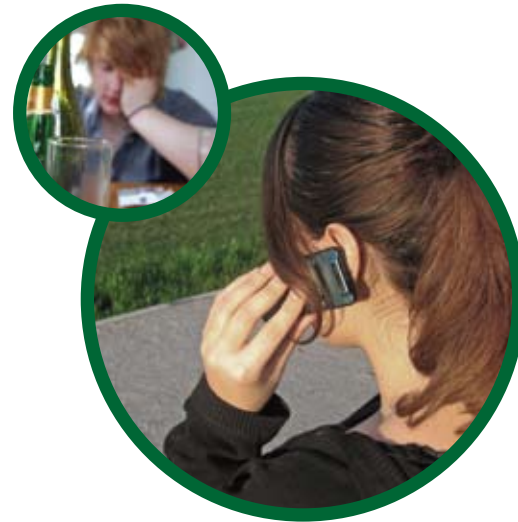
The Drinkaware Trust
www.drinkaware.co.uk

NHS
www.nhs.uk/livewell/alcohol

Alcoholics Anonymous (AA)
www.alcoholics-anonymous.org.uk
0845 769 7555

Drinkline
The national 24 hour alcohol helpline
0800 917 8282 (all calls are free of charge)

Your GP can also provide you with support and information on cutting down.



Did you know that many cases of cancer could be prevented? For practical information on choosing a healthy diet, managing your weight and becoming more active to help reduce your risk, visit our website:

www.wcrf-uk.org



WCRF UK Recommendations for Cancer Prevention

- 1 Be as lean as possible without becoming underweight
- 2 Be physically active for at least 30 minutes every day
- 3 Avoid sugary drinks. Limit consumption of energy-dense foods (particularly processed foods high in added sugar, or low in fibre, or high in fat)
- 4 Eat more of a variety of vegetables, fruits, wholegrains, and pulses such as beans
- 5 Limit consumption of red meats (such as beef, pork and lamb) and avoid processed meats
- 6 If consumed at all, limit alcoholic drinks to 2 for men and 1 for women a day
- 7 Limit consumption of salty foods and foods processed with salt (sodium)
- 8 Don't use supplements to protect against cancer

Special Population Recommendations

- 9 It is best for mothers to breastfeed exclusively for up to 6 months and then add other liquids and foods
- 10 After treatment, cancer survivors should follow the Recommendations for Cancer Prevention

And, always remember – do not smoke or chew tobacco

WCRF UK is part of the WCRF global network
For more information about this leaflet please contact us:

World Cancer Research Fund (WCRF UK)

22 Bedford Square, London WC1B 3HH Tel: 020 7343 4200 Fax: 020 7343 4201

Web: www.wcrf-uk.org Email: wcrf@wcrf.org

Registered in London, England No: 2536180

Registered with the Charity Commission in England and Wales
(Registered Charity No: 1000739)

Registered Office: 22 Bedford Square, London WC1B 3HH

“Stopping cancer before it starts”

© 2011 World Cancer Research Fund / WEV4AL

Next review date: April 2013



A CLOSER LOOK AT: Alcohol

