

Whether it's a glass of wine with a meal, or a pint of beer or a gin and tonic at the end of a busy day, for many of us, drinking alcohol is a normal part of day-to-day life. And, while the immediate effects of drinking alcohol are obvious, we often don't think about the longer-term impact on our health.

## World Cancer Research Fund Recommends:

**For cancer prevention, don't drink alcohol.**

If you choose to drink, have no more than **7** drinks a week, spread over at least **3** days.



## What is alcohol?

The type of alcohol in drinks is called ethanol. It is formed by fermentation – a process that uses bacteria or yeast to break down the natural sugars in fruits, vegetables or cereals. Most alcoholic drinks fall into one of three groups:

**Beers** (mostly made from cereals)

**Wines** (made from fruits)

**Spirits** (made from cereals, fruits or vegetables)

## What do we mean by a 'drink'?

A drink contains about 10–15 grams (15–20ml) of alcohol, so one drink is the same as:



Half a pint of normal strength beer, lager or cider (3–5% ABV\*)



One small glass (125ml) of wine (12–13% ABV\*)



One single measure (25ml) of spirits (40% ABV\*), such as vodka or whisky

It is important to remember that drinks contain different amounts of alcohol depending on their size and strength. In recent years, the standard serving sizes and the strength of many alcoholic drinks has increased, making it easier to drink more than you realise.

## What is a 'unit'?

Current drinking guidelines often refer to units of alcohol rather than a number of drinks. One unit contains 8 grams (10ml) of alcohol. As the strength of alcoholic drinks varies widely, the amount (volume) that contains one unit also varies a lot between drinks, so it can be confusing to work out what the guidelines mean – that's why we talk about drinks instead of units.

**Example: Wine with 12% ABV\***  
(contains 12 units of alcohol per litre)



1 bottle of wine (750ml)  
9 units



1 large glass of wine (250ml)  
3 units

If everyone in the UK stopped drinking alcohol, it is estimated that **23,000** cases of cancer could be prevented each year.

\* ABV stands for Alcohol By Volume, which tells us the strength of a drink, or how much of the drink is alcohol (the rest is water, sugar etc).

## How does alcohol cause cancer?

Scientists are still researching the ways that alcohol can lead to cancer. One theory is that when alcohol is broken down in our bodies, harmful compounds are formed that might directly damage the DNA in our cells, which can then lead to cancer.

## How is alcohol linked to cancer?

There is strong scientific evidence that all types of alcoholic drinks increase the risk of several types of cancer:

- |  |  |
|--|--|
|  <b>Mouth and throat</b> |  <b>Bowel</b>   |
|  <b>Oesophageal</b>      |  <b>Breast</b>  |
|  <b>Liver</b>            |  <b>Stomach</b> |

Research has shown that alcohol is particularly harmful when combined with smoking, especially for increased risk of liver, oesophageal, mouth and throat cancer.

## Are there any health benefits to drinking alcohol?

Alcohol doesn't have any benefits in terms of cancer prevention – in fact, drinking any amount increases your risk – so to protect yourself against cancer as much as possible, we suggest not drinking alcohol at all.

The latest evidence suggests that the benefits of drinking alcohol for heart health are less than previously thought and only apply to women over 55 – and even for them, the greatest reduction in risk is seen in women who drink 5 units or less a week.

In light of this, the UK Government has reviewed and lowered its guidance to drink no more than 14 units a week, spread over at least three days – this is roughly equal to the seven drinks a week we suggest as a maximum.

Remember; a healthy diet and lifestyle can reduce the risk of both cancer and heart disease.

Heavy or binge drinking is particularly bad for our health, even if only done occasionally. It's linked to high blood pressure and an increased risk of heart attack.

## What are the benefits of cutting down on alcohol?

As well as reducing your risk of cancer and other diseases, such as heart disease and stroke, liver disease, pancreatitis and osteoporosis, drinking less alcohol can:



### Save money

Alcohol can add substantially to your shopping bill or to an evening out.



### Improve mental health

Although many people drink alcohol to improve their mood, alcohol is actually a depressant and regular heavy drinking can cause depression, anxiety and other mental health problems.



### Prevent hangovers

Drinking alcohol can lead to dehydration and low blood sugar levels, which cause some of the symptoms of a hangover. There are a lot of suggested ways to reduce these symptoms but the easiest and only fail-safe way is to drink less.



### Help you to sleep better

Alcohol interferes with your natural sleep patterns.



### Help you to lose weight or maintain a healthy weight

Alcohol is high in calories and also increases your appetite (*see next page for more information*).






### Improve skin

Alcohol dehydrates the skin and drinking too much is thought to deprive it of vital nutrients.

## Can alcohol lead to weight gain?

Alcohol can be surprisingly high in calories. They are often called 'empty calories' because alcoholic drinks don't contain vital nutrients such as protein, vitamins or fibre. The lack of fibre means it is easy to drink large volumes without feeling full.

	<b>170 calories</b>	A pint of ordinary strength beer or lager <i>OR</i> 3 chocolate chip cookies
	<b>124 calories</b>	A medium glass (175ml) of wine <i>OR</i> a small packet of crisps
	<b>117 calories</b>	A single measure of spirit with cola <i>OR</i> 2 chocolate-coated wafer fingers

Alcohol can also contribute to weight gain by increasing appetite, which means that if you drink, you might be tempted to eat more than you need.

Cutting down on the amount you drink could help you to lose weight or maintain a healthy weight, which in turn can help to reduce your cancer risk.

Did you know that about a third of the most common cancers are preventable through a healthy diet, weight management and physical activity? Visit our [website](#) for advice to help reduce your cancer risk.

## Top tips for savvy drinking:

- Opt for the smallest serving size. Remember the standard serving size may not be the smallest. Avoid double measures of spirits, even if they are promoted as 'better value'.
- If you're thirsty, have a glass of water or a low-calorie soft drink to quench your thirst.
- Alternate between alcoholic drinks and water or low-calorie soft drinks.
- Dilute alcoholic drinks – ideally with a low-calorie mixer – to make them last longer. For example, opt for a small white wine spritzer with soda water rather than a large glass of wine.

## Find out more or get support

If you are concerned that you or someone you know may need support to cut down on alcohol, contact:

The Drinkaware Trust  
[www.drinkaware.co.uk](http://www.drinkaware.co.uk)

Drinkline, a free national helpline  
**0800 917 8282**

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