



HealthMatters

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Alcohol and your health

If you enjoy a glass of wine, a beer, or a cocktail now and then, keep moderation in mind to protect your health. Each year, excessive alcohol use is responsible for more than 95,000 deaths in the United States, averaging 261 deaths per day. These deaths shorten the lives of those who die by an average of almost 29 years. It is one of the leading causes of preventable death in the United States.

Health effects of alcohol

Drinking too much alcohol increases your risk for many health problems, including high blood pressure, obesity, stroke, and liver disease. Some of the ways alcohol affects our health are well known, yet others may surprise you.

Weakened immune system. If you drink often, you may notice that you catch colds, flu, or other illnesses more frequently than people who don't drink. Alcohol can weaken the immune system, increasing your chance of getting sick.

Harms your heart. Drinking too much alcohol can raise the levels of some fats in the blood, known as triglycerides. Having high triglyceride levels combined with high LDL (the "bad" cholesterol) has been associated with fatty buildup in the artery walls. Too much alcohol can also put you at higher risk for developing high blood pressure or having an irregular heartbeat pattern (arrhythmias).

Increased breast cancer risk.

Research shows that alcohol consumption affects breast cancer risk through the alteration in hormone levels. Even low levels of drinking can put you at higher risk of breast cancer.

Moderation is key

To reduce the risk of alcohol-related harms, the 2020-2025 Dietary Guidelines for Americans recommends that adults of legal drinking age either:

1. Choose not to drink.
2. If choosing to drink, limit intake to 2 drinks or less per day for men and 1 drink or less per day for women.

Excessive alcohol use includes:

- Binge drinking: consuming 4 or more alcoholic beverages per occasion for women or 5 or more drinks per occasion for men.

- Heavy drinking: consuming 8 or more alcoholic beverages per week for women or 15 or more alcoholic beverages per week for men.
- Any drinking by pregnant women or those younger than age 21.

What counts as a drink?

- 12 fluid ounces of regular beer (5% alcohol content)
- 8 fluid ounces of malt liquor (7% alcohol content)
- 5 fluid ounces of table wine (12% alcohol content)
- 1.5 fluid ounce shot of 80-proof distilled spirits (rum, tequila, vodka, whiskey, etc.)

Have you been thinking about cutting back on the amount of alcohol that you drink? If you are currently drinking more than the recommended guidelines, any change that you make, even small changes, can help reduce the harm that alcohol can cause. The key to successfully cutting back is finding something that works best for you.

Ways to curb drinking

Prioritize. Make a list of your most important reasons to reduce drinking such as getting better sleep, saving money, and improving relationships.

Manage stress. Turning to alcohol when stressed may seem like an easy way to relax, but it won't help long term. Try going for a walk, doing something that makes you happy, or using a breathing technique as a way to clear your head and manage stress.

Drink slowly. Sip your drink and never drink on an empty stomach.

Drink spacers. Drink water or sparkling water after each alcoholic beverage. Alcohol makes you dehydrated so drinking water between each drink can help keep you hydrated and help you pace your drinking.

Increase friction: don't keep alcohol in your house. It can be easier to say no in the store than at home. If you do keep it at home, keep it out of sight. Increase friction by keeping beer warm, which will make it harder to consume if the urge arises.

Choose alcohol-free days. Decide not to drink a few days each week.

Keep busy. Find a healthy distraction such as developing a new hobby or revisiting an old one. Painting, dancing, woodworking, and other activities can be a great alternative to drinking.

Be persistent. Cutting back on drinking can take time so preparing for setbacks can help. Remembering why cutting back is important can help you reach your goal.

How to turn down a drink

Is there a social event in your near future that involves alcohol? If you have an established goal of abstinence, you may find this event challenging for many reasons. It can be helpful to prepare in advance to better handle these challenges before they arise.

- Consider alternative plans: attend or host an alcohol-free event.
- Ask for support from others in coping with temptations to drink.
- A simple "no, thank you" is often sufficient for refusing alcohol.
- Keep a non-alcoholic drink in your hand during the event.
- Plan an escape if the temptation to drink gets too great.
- Review your thinking about drinking. The difference between "I can't drink" and "I can drink but choose not to" can be empowering.

If you are thinking of making a change, contact your Everside Health provider for more information and to discuss options that may be best for you.

Visit eversidehealth.com.

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