



Alcohol and Cancer



Basic description

Research shows that alcohol consumption is linked to an increased chance of developing certain cancers. The more alcohol a person consumes, the higher their risk of developing some kinds of cancer.

The way alcohol causes cancer isn't completely understood. In fact, there might be several different ways it can raise risk, and this might depend on the type of cancer. For example, it could be that alcohol itself causes cancer by increasing hormone levels, or it may be carcinogenic because of the way it's metabolized, which can make cells more vulnerable to other carcinogens, like tobacco.

People who drink heavily and smoke cigarettes or use other kinds of tobacco are at even higher risk for certain cancers.

Cancers affected

Oral, esophageal, laryngeal, and pharyngeal cancers are more common in alcohol users than in non-alcohol users. Smokers who are also heavy drinkers are at a significantly higher risk of developing these cancers.

Alcohol is also a major cause of liver cancer. By altering the liver's ability to metabolize some carcinogenic substances into harmless compounds or to disable certain existing carcinogens, alcohol's effects may influence not only liver cancer but other cancers as well.

Many studies have found a link between alcohol use and the risk of breast cancer. The risk increases with the amount of alcohol consumed. Compared with non-drinkers, women who consume 1 alcoholic drink a day have a very small increase in risk. Those who have 2 to 5 drinks daily have about 1½ times the risk of women who don't drink alcohol.

Alcohol use has been linked with a higher risk of cancers of the colon and rectum. At least some of this may be due to the fact that heavy alcohol users tend to have low levels of folic acid in the body.

Some studies have also suggested that alcohol may cause some pancreatic cancers, but the evidence is not yet conclusive. However, heavy alcohol use can lead to conditions such as chronic pancreatitis and cirrhosis, which are known to increase pancreatic cancer risk.

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Opportunities for risk reduction

Drinking alcohol in moderation is key to reducing the risk of alcohol-related cancers. The more someone drinks, the higher their risk of developing some kinds of cancer. Reducing the amount of alcohol a person drinks may reduce cancer risk. Because of the relationship between alcohol and tobacco, quitting smoking may also reduce the effect of alcohol on certain cancers.

As part of its guidelines on nutrition and physical activity for cancer prevention, the American Cancer Society recommends that people who drink alcohol limit their intake to no more than 2 drinks per day for men and 1 drink a day for women. The recommended limit is lower for women because of their smaller body size and because their bodies tend to metabolize alcohol more slowly. (A drink of alcohol is defined as 12 ounces of beer, 5 ounces of wine, or 1.5 ounces of 80-proof distilled spirits.) These daily limits do not mean people can drink larger amounts on fewer days of the week, since this can lead to health, social, and other problems.

Although higher levels of alcohol consumption have been associated with some forms of cancer, moderate alcohol intake may decrease the risk of heart disease and stroke. The cardiovascular benefits of moderate drinking may outweigh the risk of cancer in some men and women; however, adults who do not currently drink alcoholic beverages shouldn't start drinking alcohol in hopes of reducing their risk for heart disease. Cardiovascular risk can be reduced by not smoking, eating a diet low in saturated fat and trans fats (mainly found in animal sources such as meat and dairy products) and high in a variety of plant foods, maintaining healthy weight, being physically active, and controlling blood pressure and cholesterol levels. Men and women should discuss and weigh their risks of heart disease, stroke, and cancer with their health care provider, while also considering other lifestyle options (such as physical activity and good nutrition) for reducing risk for these diseases.

Bottom line

Limiting the amount of alcohol a person drinks may help lower the risk of a number of cancers. If alcohol is consumed, men should have no more than 2 drinks per day, and women should have no more than 1. In addition, the combined use of alcohol and tobacco greatly increases the risk of oral, laryngeal, pharyngeal, and esophageal cancers.

