



# Health Risks of Alcohol Abuse

## Medical Consequences of Alcohol Abuse

From the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#)

There are approximately 80,374 deaths attributable to excessive alcohol use each year in the United States.<sup>1</sup> This makes excessive alcohol use the 3rd leading lifestyle-related cause of death for the nation.<sup>2</sup> Additionally, excessive alcohol use is responsible for 2.3 million years of potential life lost (YPLL) annually, or an average of about 30 years of potential life lost for each death. In the single year 2005, there were more than 1.6 million hospitalizations<sup>3</sup> and more than 4 million emergency room visits<sup>4</sup> for alcohol-related conditions.

### The Standard Measure of Alcohol

In the United States, a standard drink is any drink that contains 0.6 ounces (13.7 grams or 1.2 tablespoons) of pure alcohol. Generally, this amount of pure alcohol is found in:

- 12-ounces of regular beer or wine cooler.
- 8-ounces of malt liquor.
- 5-ounces of wine.
- 1.5-ounces of 80-proof distilled spirits or liquor (e.g., gin, rum, vodka, whiskey).

### Definitions of Patterns of Drinking Alcohol

- Binge drinking
  - For women, 4 or more drinks during a single occasion.
  - For men, 5 or more drinks during a single occasion.
- Heavy drinking
  - For women, more than 1 drink per day on average.
  - For men, more than 2 drinks per day on average.

**Excessive drinking** includes heavy drinking, binge drinking or both. Most people who binge drink are not alcoholics or alcohol dependent. <sup>5</sup>

According to the Dietary Guidelines for Americans, if you drink alcoholic beverages, do so in moderation, which is defined as no more than 1 drink per day for women and no more than 2 drinks per day for men.<sup>6</sup> However, there are some persons who should not drink any alcohol, including those who are

- Pregnant or trying to become pregnant.
- Taking prescription or over-the-counter medications that may cause harmful reactions when mixed with alcohol.
- Younger than age 21.
- Recovering from alcoholism or are unable to control the amount they drink.
- Suffering from a medical condition that may be worsened by alcohol.
- Driving, planning to drive, or participating in other activities requiring skill, coordination, and alertness.



## Immediate Health Risks

Excessive alcohol use has immediate effects that increase the risk of many harmful health conditions. These immediate effects are most often the result of binge drinking and include the following:

- Unintentional injuries, including traffic injuries, falls, drownings, burns, and unintentional firearm injuries.[7](#)
- Violence, including intimate partner violence and child maltreatment. About 35% of victims report that offenders are under the influence of alcohol.[8](#) Alcohol use is also associated with 2 out of 3 incidents of intimate partner violence.[8](#) Studies have also shown that alcohol is a leading factor in child maltreatment and neglect cases, and is the most frequent substance abused among these parents.[9](#)
- Risky sexual behaviors, including unprotected sex, sex with multiple partners, and increased risk of sexual assault. These behaviors can result in unintended pregnancy or sexually transmitted diseases.[10, 11](#)
- Miscarriage and stillbirth among pregnant women, and a combination of physical and mental birth defects among children that last throughout life.[12, 13](#)
- Alcohol poisoning, a medical emergency that results from high blood alcohol levels that suppress the central nervous system and can cause loss of consciousness, low blood pressure and body temperature, coma, respiratory depression, or death.[14](#)

## Long-Term Health Risks

Over time, excessive alcohol use can lead to the development of chronic diseases, neurological impairments and social problems. These include but are not limited to:

- Neurological problems, including dementia, stroke and neuropathy.[15, 16](#)
- Cardiovascular problems, including myocardial infarction, cardiomyopathy, atrial fibrillation and hypertension.[17](#)
- Psychiatric problems, including depression, anxiety, and suicide.[18](#)
- Social problems, including unemployment, lost productivity, and family problems.[19, 20](#)
- Cancer of the mouth, throat, esophagus, liver, colon, and breast.[21](#) In general, the risk of cancer increases with increasing amounts of alcohol.
- Liver diseases, including-
  - Alcoholic hepatitis.
  - Cirrhosis, which is among the 15 leading causes of all deaths in the United States.[22](#)
- Among persons with Hepatitis C virus, worsening of liver function and interference with medications used to treat this condition.[23](#)
- Other gastrointestinal problems, including pancreatitis and gastritis.[24, 25](#)



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