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## Healthy Insights

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## Should You Drink to Your Health?

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), about 178,000 people die from excessive alcohol use each year in the United States. Drinking too much can lead to serious health complications, especially for older adults. Although there is some evidence that alcohol use may have health benefits in small amounts, too much on occasion or over time can pose immediate and long-term health risks.

### Aging and Alcohol

Some older people feel the effects of alcohol more strongly. This could lead to safety issues like falls and injuries. As we age, our bones become thinner and may break more easily. Studies show that fractures in older adults increase with heavy alcohol use. Death of a loved one, failing health, and other life changes often happen in older age and can lead to loneliness, boredom, anxiety, or depression. These kinds of emotions and events can sometimes lead to a harmful dependency on alcohol. Many older people take medications that can be dangerous when mixed with alcohol. Some combinations include:

- Aspirin and alcohol (can increase your risk of stomach or intestinal bleeding)
- Acetaminophen and alcohol (can cause liver damage)
- Some sleeping pills, pain pills, or anxiety/anti-depression medication and alcohol (can be deadly)



### How Alcohol Affects the Body

Drinking too much can lead to cancer, liver damage, immune system disorders, and brain damage. It can also worsen some health conditions like osteoporosis, diabetes, high blood pressure, stroke, ulcers, memory loss, and mood disorders. Alcohol use can cause symptoms of other medical conditions in your body. This can make diagnosis of medical conditions hard. For example, changes in the heart and blood vessels due to drinking could dull pain that could warn of a heart attack. Drinking can lead to forgetfulness and confusion which can be mistaken for Alzheimer's or dementia.

### How Much is Too Much?

To lessen the effects of serious health complications and other safety issues that come with drinking too much alcohol, know your limit before you start drinking. Men should have no more than two drinks a day and women only one. The definition of "one drink" is:

- One 12-ounce can or bottle of regular beer, ale, or hard seltzer
- One 8- or 9-ounce can or bottle of malt liquor
- One 5-ounce glass of red or white wine
- One 1.5-ounce shot glass of 80-proof distilled spirits like gin, rum, tequila, vodka, or whiskey



Cutting down on drinking could have positive health effects. It could keep your blood sugar under control, lower your blood pressure, ensure proper liver function, and lessen the chances of falling and hurting yourself. Additionally, health problems or prescribed medications may require you to drink less alcohol or stop drinking completely.

### Health Benefits of Alcohol

Some research suggests that small amounts of alcohol may have health benefits. Compared to people who don't drink at all or those who drink too much, moderate drinkers had lower death rates in some studies. Moderate drinking can decrease the risk of coronary heart disease, cardiovascular mortality, developing gallstones, developing diabetes, and dementia or decreased cognitive decline over time. Many doctors warn that the risks of drinking may outweigh the benefits, so you should not start drinking alcohol for its potential health benefits. Be sure to talk with your doctor to discuss the risks and benefits of drinking. If you suspect that you or someone you love may be drinking too much, here are some resources:

- The National Institute of Health's National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA) "Rethinking Drinking" website (<https://bit.ly/4gxjXbz>) provides tools that can help lead to better health.
- Alcoholics Anonymous (<https://bit.ly/4aNmxsl>) offers support and programs for people who want to stop drinking.



### Sources

[Aging and Alcohol | NIH NIAAA | https://bit.ly/4hJe3oV](#)

[Facts About Aging and Alcohol | NIH NIA | https://bit.ly/3Q5pN9m](#)

[Balancing the risks, benefits of alcohol | Mayo Clinic | https://mayocl.in/3CCxfV](#)

*IPRO Healthy Insights* comes from Dr. Clare Bradley, IPRO's Senior Vice President/Chief Medical Officer, a nationally recognized public health advocate.

IPRO is a non-profit organization that works with government agencies, providers and patients to measure and improve healthcare for all. For over 35 years we've made creative use of clinical expertise, emerging technology and data solutions to make the healthcare system work better.



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