

How alcohol increases your risk of cancer

Alcohol is classified as a Group 1 carcinogen, which means there is no doubt it causes cancer, just like tobacco and asbestos.

Five ways alcohol can cause cancer.

1. Alcohol is broken down in the body and forms acetaldehyde. Acetaldehyde is a cell poison and human carcinogen (cancer-causing agent), and damages cells by disrupting our DNA.
2. Alcohol can cause direct tissue damage and increases the ability of other carcinogens (such as tobacco) to cause damage to cells, in the mouth, pharynx, oesophagus, colon and liver.
3. Alcohol can influence hormone levels, increasing cancer risk, particularly in the breast.
4. Alcohol can reduce folate absorption, which can result in changes in the cell, potentially making it more likely to become cancerous.
5. Alcohol and many of the mixers (e.g. soft drink) we add are high in calories, which can contribute to weight gain and obesity. Being above a healthy weight increases the risk of 13 different cancers.

Did you know that alcohol causes cancer in 7 sites of the body?

There is strong evidence that drinking any type of alcohol (wine, beer and spirits) is a cause of cancer in seven sites of the body, including mouth, throat, breast, liver and bowel.

Mouth, throat and oesophagus

Alcohol damages the cells lining the mouth, throat (pharynx and larynx) and oesophagus as it enters the mouth and is swallowed, causing cancer in these parts of the body

Female breast

There are a number of potential ways that alcohol causes breast cancer in females, including by increasing the levels of hormones in the blood.

Liver

The liver is responsible for breaking down alcohol in the body, which results in the conversion of alcohol to acetaldehyde. The liver breakdowns alcohol in three different ways, and all three ways lead to the conversion of alcohol into acetaldehyde.

Alcohol damages the liver by causing a build-up of fat, inflammation and scarring, which can lead to liver cancer.

Colon and rectum

Alcohol can cause cancer in the colon and rectum by multiple pathways, including by acetaldehyde damaging DNA and stopping cells from repairing this damage.

How can you reduce your risk of alcohol-caused cancer?

Making small changes to your drinking can help reduce your risk. Try reducing how often and how much you drink by:

Having a few alcohol-free days each week.

Having alcohol-free days each week will help you stay healthy and break bad habits. If you're already having alcohol-free days each week, try to add another. Head online to alcoholthinkagain.com.au to see the benefits of reducing how often you drink.

Keeping track of your drinking by counting your drinks.

Actively counting how many drinks you have each drinking occasion can contribute to reduced alcohol use overall.

Swap to low or no alcohol alternatives.

Low and no alcohol products are a good alternative for people who want to reduce their drinking – they have the same or similar taste but contain less alcohol.

Limit how much alcohol you keep in the house.

If it's not there, you can't drink it! If you're not ready to make your house a drink-free zone, avoid stocking up on alcohol at the next trip to the bottle shop. The more alcohol we buy, the more likely we are to drink it sooner than we had intended.

Finding ways to change your routine.

If your routine includes relaxing with a drink, change it up by going outside to get some fresh air and exercise.

Are you at-risk of alcohol-caused cancer?



Almost 1 in 5 Western Australian's reported drinking more than two standard drinks on any day in 2019, placing them at-risk of long-term health harms.

The risk of developing an alcohol-caused cancer increases with the amount and frequency of alcohol use.

For more information and ways to reduce your risk, head to alcoholthinkagain.com.au