



Alcohol

Alcohol is widely used throughout the world. It has many harmful and dangerous effects, yet it also has been accepted as a drink for centuries.

Role of alcohol in health

Evidence suggests that low intakes of alcohol are not harmful (they may even be beneficial but evidence is unclear), but when too much alcohol is taken, the risk of death and disease increases considerably.

- ✦ Excess alcohol increases the risk of the common cancers (breast, colon, rectum) and some of the less common cancers (mouth, oesophagus, larynx and stomach).
- ✦ Alcohol contributes to obesity through its high energy content and by lessening the body's ability to burn fat.
- ✦ Long-term heavy drinking causes liver cirrhosis (which leads to liver failure or cancer).
- ✦ Excessive drinking can also destroy the cells in the body that produce insulin and in the long term can result in diabetes.
- ✦ There is evidence that long-term high intake of alcohol may result in hypertension (high blood pressure).
- ✦ Drinking alcohol regularly in excess can lead to weight gain, increased blood pressure and other risk factors for heart disease.
- ✦ Heavy drinking may increase the risk of stroke.
- ✦ Alcohol in small amounts tends to increase appetite. Drinking to excess reduces appetite (heavy drinkers often become malnourished). Excess alcohol can also affect the absorption of certain nutrients.

- ✦ Alcohol is a depressant. Small amounts of alcohol make people feel more relaxed and uninhibited, but in larger doses, alcohol can affect concentration and co-ordination.



Social effects

These are perhaps the effects that are more visible to us all.

- ✦ *Accidents* – particularly on the road when drivers have been drinking. You do not have to be noticeably drunk to be a danger. Even one drink slows down your response time. Accidents also happen as the person loses his or her balance and co-ordination.
- ✦ *Violence* – many people become violent, abusive and unpredictable after drinking. This results in fights and domestic violence.
- ✦ *Missing work* – people whose drinking has become out of control often miss work, and ignore family and friends.
- ✦ *Spending money on drink* – the need to drink becomes so strong that the drinker spends money needed for food and other essentials on drink – leaving his or her family hungry.

These social problems are particularly common with binge drinking. This is a typical pattern of drinking in many Pacific Islands. After being paid, or at special events, people drink to excess, becoming violent and dangerous.



How much is safe?

Low risk is normally considered as

✦ up to three standard drinks per day for men and

✦ up to two standard drinks per day for women.

Binge drinking can be considered to be over 4–5 drinks. Binge drinking is particularly harmful to the body.

Standard drink

One standard drink has 10 g of alcohol, which is provided by:

- ✦ 285 ml full-strength beer,
- ✦ 375 ml light beer,
- ✦ 100 ml wine, or
- ✦ 30 ml spirit.

Note: One can (375 ml) of full-strength beer = 1.5 standard drinks.

The important point is that this is a daily limit. Drinking more than this amount at one time carries the risk of all the health and social problems, regardless of whether you had drinks the rest of the week. It does not work to 'save up unused drinks from other days' in terms of risk to health or social life. Binge or heavy drinking is the most likely to cause the social problems.

Alcohol during pregnancy

Drinking any alcohol during pregnancy causes a higher risk of having a baby who is smaller or premature or who has abnormalities including Foetal Alcohol Syndrome.

