

14 ways you can help prevent cancer



Recommendation 6 for Individuals on Alcohol

Avoid alcoholic drinks.

Key summary

- Regular consumption of alcoholic drinks is associated with an increased risk of many types of cancer. The risks are highest for cancers of the oral cavity, pharynx, larynx, oesophagus, and liver. The risks are also elevated for common cancer types, such as breast cancer and colorectal cancer.
- In 2018, in the European Union (EU), the average consumption was 11.3 litres of pure alcohol per person per year, which translates to more than two bottles of wine or 4 litres of beer per week. Men consume approximately three times as much alcohol as women.
- To reduce cancer risk, it is best to avoid drinking alcoholic drinks. The widespread availability and social acceptance (normalization) of alcohol should also be addressed.

Alcohol and cancer

Worldwide and within Europe, alcohol consumption levels vary; the 27 EU Member States have the highest average alcohol consumption compared with other economically developed countries.

Alcoholic drinks include beer, wine, and spirits. Beer typically contains 3–7% alcohol, wine 9–15%, and spirits 35–50%. A standard drink, containing 10–15 grams of alcohol, is usually used as the reference measure to quantify alcohol consumption in research and health communication. The **amount of alcohol** in the drink is important **to cancer risk, rather than the other components of the alcoholic drink**.

Drinking alcohol, even at low doses, does not reduce your risk of death. Alcohol consumption negatively affects your health in several ways. The only way to avoid this negative impact is to not drink at all.

Younger individuals are more likely to binge drink, for example drinking more than 80% of a bottle of wine or 1.5 litres of beer per drinking occasion. Older age groups are more likely to drink daily.

Drinking alcoholic drinks is carcinogenic (causes cancer) to humans, and there is strong evidence that it increases the risk of several cancer types. In general, the more alcohol consumed, the higher the risk of cancer. The alcohol-associated cancer risk increases when alcohol consumption is combined with cigarette smoking.

There is sufficient evidence that reducing or stopping alcohol consumption decreases the risk of several cancer types.

Actions to reduce your cancer risk

Avoid drinking alcoholic drinks. Choose non-alcoholic drinks. Motivate your family and friends to do the same. Plan activities that do not (always) include drinking alcohol when socializing, such as going for walks or meeting for coffee. The less alcohol you drink, the lower your risk of harm.

Denormalize alcohol consumption by drinking and offering alternatives to alcohol when celebrating special occasions at home and in the workplace. Encourage bars, canteens, restaurants, and sports venues to offer alcohol alternatives.

Speak to your health professional if you would like more information or support. Your health professional can provide you with information about the link between alcohol and cancer, and help you to access support to avoid and denormalize alcohol consumption.

Co-benefits for prevention of non-communicable diseases (NCDs) with similar risk factors and opportunities for health promotion

Not drinking alcohol, or reducing alcohol consumption, has numerous other benefits for overall health and wellbeing. These include lower rates of respiratory infections, cardiovascular diseases (including ischemic heart disease, haemorrhagic and ischemic stroke, hypertensive heart disease, and atrial fibrillation and flutter), diabetes, cirrhosis and other chronic liver diseases, pancreatitis, epilepsy, tuberculosis, alcohol use disorders, transport injuries, unintentional injuries, self-harm, interpersonal violence, and the negative psychosocial and social effects of alcohol consumption on those who drink and their environment.

Specific target groups

It is important to specifically target children, adolescents, and young adults, because research has shown that alcohol drinking and alcohol drinking patterns (e.g. binge drinking) at these ages affect drinking patterns later in life. There are socioeconomic differences in drinking patterns, which vary across countries and sexes. People from both higher and lower income groups tend to consume alcohol more frequently than people from middle income groups. Women with a higher level of education tend to drink more frequently than women with low levels of education.



Learn about the policies that help support avoiding alcohol consumption

Some of the most effective policies to support denormalizing and reducing alcohol consumption include:

- Applying fiscal policies, such as increasing taxes and setting a minimum price for alcoholic drinks.
- Restricting the physical availability of retail alcohol (e.g. via reduced hours of sale), and restricting exposure to alcohol advertising (across multiple types of media).
- Protecting children from alcohol promotion, because drinking at a young age is an important risk factor for drinking in adulthood.
- Putting labels with population-wide health warnings on alcohol products.

References

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