



Drugs are a waste of time. They destroy your memory and your self-respect and everything that goes along with your self-esteem.
– Kurt Cobain on the futility of substance abuse
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Alcohol & Cancer

A recent population-based study of 4.5 million adults found that levels of cancer risk was linked to the amount of alcohol consumed.

Researchers asked the question “How does the risk of developing cancer change after alcohol consumption is increased, stopped, or reduced?”

The study found that people who increased their consumption of alcohol (compared to those who maintained a consistent level of alcohol use), had a higher rate of alcohol-related cancer and all cancers.

In the study, individuals who changed from non-drinker to mild, moderate, or heavy drinker had an associated higher risk of alcohol-related cancer.

The good news is that people who quit drinking and maintained abstinence over time, had a lower risk of alcohol-related cancer than those who continued their same previous level of alcohol use.

The researchers concluded that alcohol cessation and reduction should be reinforced for the prevention of cancer. The study was published on August 24, 2022 in *JAMA Network Open*.

Increased Risk

Hundreds of studies over the past four decades have shown a link between alcohol use and cancer.

The medical community recognizes that consumption of alcoholic drinks is a well-established risk for alcohol-related cancers like cancer of the mouth, throat, larynx, esophagus, liver, colon, stomach, and breast. For each of these cancers, the more alcohol a person drinks, the higher the cancer risk. But for some types of cancer, most notably breast cancer, consuming even small amounts of alcohol can increase risk.

How does alcohol increase cancer risk? When alcohol is consumed, the body breaks it down into a chemical known as *acetaldehyde*.

Acetaldehyde damages DNA and prevents the body from repairing the damage. DNA is the cell’s “instruction manual” that controls a cell’s normal growth and function. When DNA is damaged, a cell can begin growing out of control and create a cancer tumor.

Another way alcohol increases cancer risk is by contributing to weight gain. Alcohol and other contents of mixed drinks and wine, add extra “empty” calories to the diet which results in weight gain, and being overweight is known to increase many types of cancer.

Alcohol also adversely affects levels of hormones like estrogen. Hormones act as messengers that tell cells to divide and grow. The more a cell divides, the greater the chances for something to go wrong and for cancer to develop.

It is important that people understand all of the ways that alcohol can increase the risk of getting cancer.

Communication is Key

Unfortunately, the majority of people in the U.S. are unaware of the alcohol-cancer link. In a recent survey of 3,900 Americans, only 20% were aware that wine increases cancer risk; 25% said that beer can cause cancer and 31% associated cancer risk with liquor consumption.

The American Institute for Cancer Research (AICR) has emphasized the need to increase awareness of the alcohol-cancer link. One way to spread the word is through employee education efforts within certified drug free workplace programs using monthly training newsletters like this one.

Reducing the Risk

The American Cancer Society states that alcohol use is one of the most important preventable risk factors for cancer and therefore, it is best to not drink alcohol at all.

Everyone needs to realize that each time a person drinks, the risk of cancer is increased—and just like with cigarettes and drug use, there is no “safe” amount of alcohol to consume.

But researchers, medical professionals, and substance abuse prevention specialists recognize that many Americans are not going to abstain from drinking alcohol completely. In fact, slightly more than half of Americans report drinking at some point in the previous month.

So, for people who choose to drink, it is recommended that they should limit intake to no more than 2 drinks per day for men and 1 drink per day for women. A standard 1-drink size is 12 oz. of beer, 5 oz. of wine, or 1.5 oz. of 80-proof liquor.

People often ask if one type of alcoholic drink is less harmful than another. But when it comes to cancer risk, there is no drink that is better than the others. All alcoholic beverages have ethanol in them, and it is the ethanol that is directly linked to cancer risk.

For those who want to lower alcohol intake, there are several ways to do so, including alternating alcoholic and non-alcoholic drinks, ordering smaller sizes, or keeping a few days a week alcohol free. Removing alcoholic drinks from the home is also a good strategy.