

Alcohol and Colon Cancer: Is There a Correlation?

Excluding skin cancers, colorectal cancer is the third most common cancer diagnosed in both men and women in the United States. Alcohol use has been linked with a higher risk of cancers of the colon and rectum. The evidence for this is generally stronger in men than in women, but studies have found the link in both sexes.

Ethanol is the type of alcohol found in alcoholic drinks, whether they are beers, wines, liquors (distilled spirits), or other drinks. Alcoholic drinks contain different percentages of ethanol, but in general, a standard size drink of any type — 12 ounces of beer, 5 ounces of wine, or 1.5 ounces of 80-proof liquor — contains about the same amount of ethanol.

Overall, the amount of alcohol someone drinks over time, not the type of alcoholic beverage, seems to be the most important factor in raising cancer risk. Most evidence suggests that it is the ethanol that increases the risk, not other things in the drink.

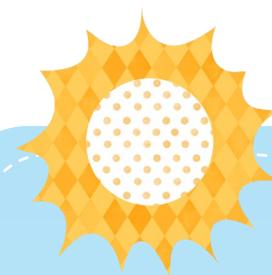
Exactly how alcohol affects cancer risk isn't completely understood. In fact, there might be several different ways it can raise risk, and this might depend on the type of cancer. Alcohol can act as an irritant, especially in the mouth and throat. Cells that are damaged by the alcohol may try to repair themselves, which could lead to DNA changes that can be a step toward cancer. Bacteria that normally live in the colon and rectum can convert alcohol into large amounts of acetaldehyde, a chemical that has been shown to cause cancer in lab animals. Alcohol may help other harmful chemicals, such as those in tobacco smoke, enter the cells lining the upper digestive tract more easily.

Alcohol might affect the body's ability to absorb some nutrients, such as folate. Folate is a vitamin that cells in the body need to stay healthy. Absorption of nutrients can be even worse in heavy drinkers, who often have low levels of folate. These low levels may play a role in the risk of some cancers, such as colorectal cancer.

Too much alcohol can add extra calories to the diet, which can contribute to weight gain in some people. Being overweight or obese is known to increase the risks of many types of cancer.

On the other hand, low to moderate alcohol use has been linked with a lower risk of heart disease in some people. Low to moderate use is usually defined as **1 or 2 drinks a day for a man or 1 drink a day for a woman**. The potential benefit of lowering heart disease risk has to be weighed against the possible health risks for each person.

The American Cancer Society recommends that people who drink alcohol limit their intake to no more than 2 drinks per day for men and 1 drink a day for women.



Alcohol use during and after cancer treatment

It is not clear whether alcohol use after cancer treatment might increase the risk of cancers recurring.

In theory, it is possible that alcohol use might raise the risk of recurrence, but there is no strong evidence to support this.

In people who have already been diagnosed with cancer, alcohol intake could also affect the risk of developing a new cancer.

There are some cases during cancer treatment in which alcohol should be avoided—for example, even in small amounts, alcohol can irritate mouth sores caused by some cancer treatments.

Alcohol can also interact with some drugs used during cancer treatment, which might increase the risk of harmful side effects.

For people who have completed cancer treatment, cancer recurrence risk is largely unknown—factors that are important to discuss with your doctor are...

1. The type of cancer
2. Your risk of recurrence
3. Your treatment
4. Your overall health
5. Other possible risks and benefits of drinking

