



Alcohol: How much is too much?

This guide can help you make informed decisions
around alcohol and your health

VA



U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs

Veterans Health Administration
PBM Academic Detailing Services

First, Let Us Test Your Knowledge About Alcohol:

- | | | |
|--|-------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| 1. You cannot have a problem with alcohol if you only drink wine or beer | <input type="checkbox"/> TRUE | <input type="checkbox"/> FALSE |
| 2. You only have a problem with alcohol if you drink every day | <input type="checkbox"/> TRUE | <input type="checkbox"/> FALSE |
| 3. Drinking can help you control stress | <input type="checkbox"/> TRUE | <input type="checkbox"/> FALSE |
| 4. Red wine is good for your heart | <input type="checkbox"/> TRUE | <input type="checkbox"/> FALSE |
| 5. Alcohol is good for your immune system | <input type="checkbox"/> TRUE | <input type="checkbox"/> FALSE |
| 6. Alcohol can help you sleep better | <input type="checkbox"/> TRUE | <input type="checkbox"/> FALSE |

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Veterans Crisis Line 1-800-273-TALK (8255) or Text - 838255
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Answers

Q1

FALSE: It is not the type of alcohol you drink but how much you drink. A standard amount of alcohol is:

- A 12 oz. beer
- 5 oz. glass of wine
- 1.5 oz of liquor

Q2

FALSE: A person does not need to drink every day to have unhealthy or unsafe drinking habits. You may be at risk if you are:

- Men 65 years of age or under: more than four drinks a day or more than 14 drinks in a week
- Women of any age and men over 65 years of age: more than three drinks a day or more than seven drinks in a week

Q3

FALSE: Drinking alcohol, especially over the recommended limits and over a long period of time, can cause:

- Symptoms of panic and anxiety disorders
- Depression
- Other mental health disorders.

Q4

TRUE: Red wine may have heart-protective effects when used at moderate levels. Moderate levels are about one drink a day for women and one to two drinks a day for men. Red wine and alcohol in higher levels can lead to more health problems, including harming the heart.

Q5

FALSE: Alcohol use, especially over the recommended limits, weakens the immune system. This can reduce your body's ability to fight infections like influenza (the flu) or COVID-19.

Q6

FALSE: Research has shown that alcohol changes your deep sleep patterns. This can cause you to not sleep well or feel rested in the morning.

Do not worry if you had a different answer to some or all of these questions. You are not alone! There is a lot of misinformation about alcohol out there.

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The material below provides information about alcohol and your health.
Use this to help answer questions you might have about alcohol.

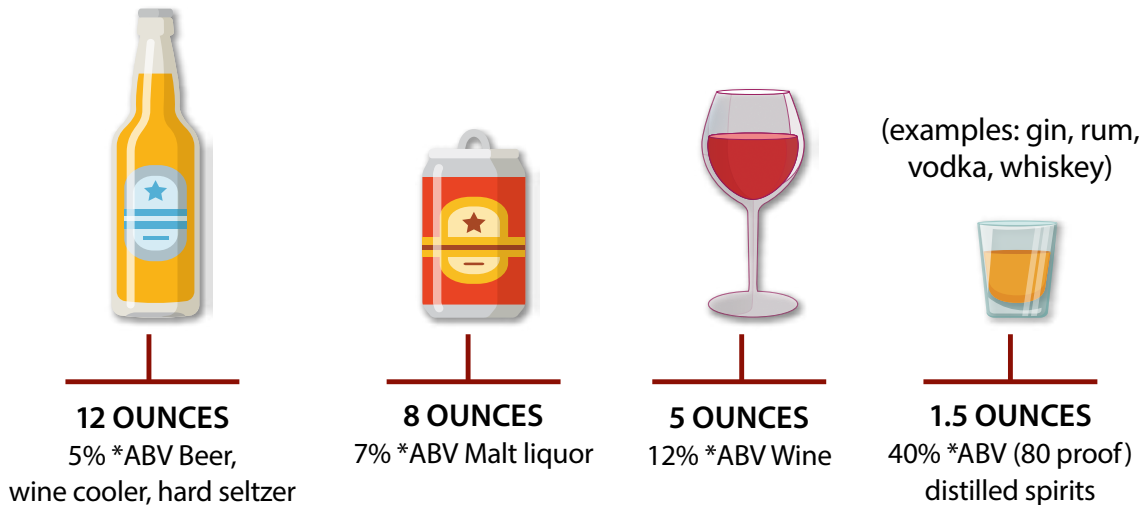
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Alcohol Use and Your Health

During times of stress or isolation, such as during the COVID-19 pandemic, many people turn to alcohol to cope. This could lead to drinking more than may be healthy or safe.

Drinking too much can harm your body and affect your overall health. If you consume alcohol, it is important to know your risks. Below is information that can help you understand if your health is at risk.

What counts as ONE drink?



*ABV = Alcohol by Volume

What is considered moderate drinking?



To reduce the risks associated with alcohol it is recommended that you drink in moderation. Moderate levels are about one drink a day for women and one to two drinks a day for men. You can also choose not to drink.

If you choose to drink alcohol, be safe! Your health risks are less if you stay within the daily or weekly recommended limits. Anything over the recommended daily and weekly limits is considered heavy drinking.

You Are a Heavy Drinker if...

you are a

female

who drinks

8



or a heavy
drinking day
which is more
than 3 drinks



+

a day

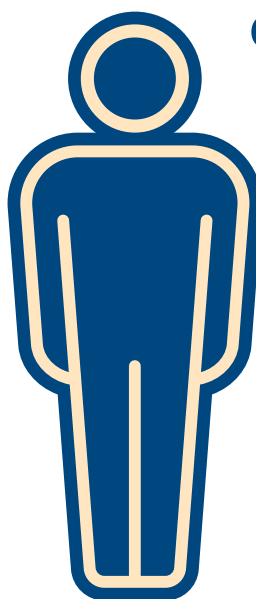
or more drinks
in 1 week

you are a

male

who drinks

15



or a heavy
drinking day
which is
more than
4 drinks









+



a day

or more
drinks
in 1 week

Heavy drinking can put you at risk for the following:

Increased cancer risk <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Breast ■ Mouth ■ Throat ■ Liver ■ Colon 	More risk for infections <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Frequent colds ■ Higher risk of pneumonia or lung infections 	May increase or worsen mental health issues <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Anxiety ■ Depression ■ Insomnia or sleep issues 
Increased risk for chronic diseases <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ High blood pressure ■ Heart disease ■ Stroke ■ Liver disease ■ Painful nerves (numbness and tingling) 	May have trouble with learning and memory <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Memory loss ■ Dementia ■ Poor school or work performance 	Increased stomach and digestive issues <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Stomach problems ■ Heartburn ■ Vitamin deficiencies ■ Bleeding ■ Ulcers ■ Malnutrition 
Increased reproductive problems <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Male: Impaired sexual performance ■ Female: Decreased fertility; risk of birth defects 		Increased social, legal, medical, domestic, job, and financial issues

Drinking over the daily and weekly limits can also increase the risk of developing alcohol use disorder.

Look at the list below and see if anything sounds familiar?

- ☐ When I drink, I set limits but cannot stick with them.
- ☐ I would like to cut down or stop drinking. I have tried to control my alcohol use but have not been able to reduce it.
- ☐ I spend a lot of my time drinking or recovering from hangovers.
- ☐ I have a strong urge or desire to drink alcohol.
- ☐ I have given up or cut back on things I enjoy so that I can drink or recover from drinking alcohol.
- ☐ I continue to drink alcohol despite the problems it is causing with my relationship with family or friends.
- ☐ Drinking makes it hard for me to take care of my home, family or has resulted in job or school troubles.

- ☐ I continue to drink alcohol despite it worsening my health problems.
- ☐ I must drink more to get the effect I want or the effect that I used to have in the past.
- ☐ I use alcohol and then engage in activities like driving, swimming, or unsafe sex. Using alcohol while doing these activities could put me or others at increased physical risk.
- ☐ I feel shaky, anxious, and/or sweaty when the alcohol wears off.

Did you check any of the boxes?

If so, this could mean that your drinking has become problematic. If this is the case, you can take steps to reduce your risk. Remember that small changes can make a big difference. See the next page for ideas around cutting back on drinking.

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If you have a hard time cutting down, talk to your provider about your concerns. Together you can form a plan to help you cut down or stop drinking altogether.

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Stopping alcohol can cause alcohol withdrawal and it could be fatal. If you have had withdrawal symptoms in the past, work with your medical provider to develop a plan.

Below are common alcohol withdrawal symptoms:

- Whole body: shakiness, sweating, or loss of appetite
- Behavioral: agitation, restlessness, or irritability
- Gastrointestinal: nausea or vomiting
- Mood: anxiety or nervousness
- Also common: fast heart rate, tremor, disorientation, headache, insomnia, or seizures

Tips for cutting down on alcohol and reducing risk

- **Set drinking goals.** Decide how many days a week you will drink and how many drinks you will have on those days. Try and stay within the low-risk limits.
- **Measure your drinks.** Know how many drinks you have a day based on what is considered one drink of alcohol. Count and track how many drinks you drink weekly. There are apps that can help with this like VETCHANGE: <https://vetchange.org/home/index2>
- **Eat food when drinking alcohol. Do not drink on empty stomach and alternate with non-alcoholic beverages.** Do not drink on an empty stomach. If you plan to have more than one drink, space them out by alternating with water or another non-alcoholic beverage.
- **Avoid triggers.** What increases your urge to drink? Avoid people, places, and activities that trigger the urge to drink. If you drink at home, keep little or no alcohol there.
- **Reduce the amount you drink.** Keep a list of your reasons for cutting back or quitting drinking handy. This list can be on your phone, on an index card in your wallet, or purse. Remember to revise this list as you think of things.
- **Plan to handle urges.** Do something healthy and remind yourself of your reasons for not drinking. Talk to someone or “urge surf” and ride out the feeling knowing that it will pass.
- **Plan how to say “no”.** When you do not want to drink, be prepared to say no in a polite, convincing way.
- **Get support.** Identify one or two people who will support you as you start making changes in your drinking. Reach out to them regularly to connect about how you are doing.
- **Develop new habits.** Engage in healthy activities or hobbies that do not involve alcohol.
- **Get help.** If you drink to manage stress or symptoms of PTSD, anxiety, or depression, talk to your doctor about treatment.

Give coping strategies more than one chance AND keep trying new things. Make a note of what strategies help you meet your drinking goals. Which situations are tough for you, where you might need to identify other options.

Getting a handle on your drinking may be challenging. It may take several tries before you feel steady and do not find yourself thinking about alcohol.

Many, many Veterans have met this challenge. They report feeling healthier and can think more clearly. These Veterans like who they see in the mirror and are grateful to be free of “needing” a drink. You can get there too!

Potential benefits of cutting down the amount you drink!



Better Sleep,
More Energy



Improved
Mental Health



Happier
Stomach,
Weight Loss

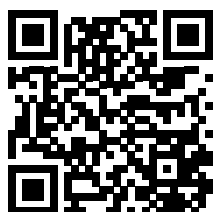


Better
Long-Term
Physical Health

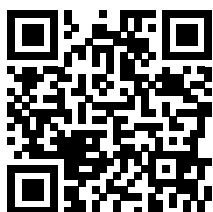
If you need help to begin making changes, take this brochure to your VA provider at your next appointment and discuss treatment options. There are medications and other treatments available that could help you.

Helpful Links:

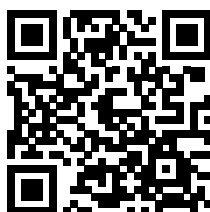
- <http://rethinkingdrinking.niaaa.nih.gov/>
- <http://www.niaaa.nih.gov/alcohol-health>
- <http://findtreatment.samhsa.gov>
- <https://vetchange.org/home/index2>



NIAAA
Rethinking
Drinking



NIAAA
Alcohol Health



Substance Abuse
and Mental Health
Administration



VETCHANGE

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Veterans Crisis Line 1-800-273-TALK (8255) or Text - 838255
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Notes

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**U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs Veterans
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VA PBM Academic Detailing
<http://www.pbm.va.gov/PBM/academicdetailingservicehome.asp>**

