

Is Alcohol Putting Your Health at Risk?

Drinking too much can harm your physical and mental health.

Below are health risks associated with alcohol when used above the recommended daily/weekly limits.

Heavy drinking can put you at risk for the following:

Cancer risk

- Breast
- Mouth
- Throat
- Liver
- Colon



Sexual and reproductive health issues

- Male: impaired sexual performance
- Female: infertility, risk of birth defects



Worsening mental health issues

- Anxiety
- Depression
- Insomnia or sleep issues
- Anger & violence
- Suicide risk



Risk for chronic diseases

- High blood pressure
- Heart disease
- Stroke
- Liver disease
- Painful nerves (numbness and tingling in hands and feet)



Trouble with learning and memory

- Blackouts
- Dementia
- Poor school or work performance



Increased stomach and digestive issues

- Stomach problems
- Heartburn
- Vitamin deficiencies
- Bleeding
- Ulcers
- Malnutrition



Work and family life

- Work: increased absence, accidents, lower performance, unemployment
- Family: marital conflict, infidelity, higher risk of emotional issues in children, financial strain

Legal troubles

- Impaired driving
- Car accidents
- Loss of custody of children



Feeling sick or having infections

- Frequent colds
- Lower ability to fight off infections like bronchitis or pneumonia



What counts as one drink?



12 ounces
5% *ABV beer,
wine cooler, hard seltzer



5 ounces
12% *ABV wine



8 ounces
7% *ABV malt liquor



1.5 ounces
40% *ABV (80 proof)
distilled spirits (gin,
rum, vodka, whiskey)

*ABV = Alcohol by Volume

You are a heavy drinker if...

You are a
female
who drinks

8



OR you have 1 heavy
drinking day per
week, which is more
than 3 drinks a day



or more drinks in 1 week

You are a **male**
who drinks

15



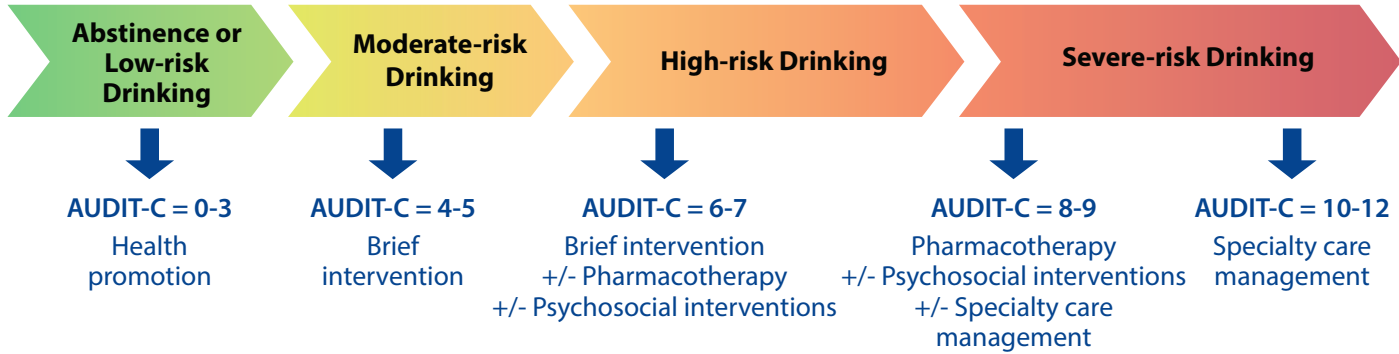
OR you have 1 heavy
drinking day per
week, which is more
than 4 drinks a day



or more drinks
in 1 week

Discussing Recommended Alcohol Limits with Veterans

Step 1. Use AUDIT-C score to assess risk and inform treatment plans^{1,2}



Step 2. Offer a brief intervention and/or treatment based on AUDIT-C score

Provide at least one 5-minute brief intervention for Veterans with moderate-high risk drinking (AUDIT-C 4-7)³⁻⁵

RECOMMENDATIONS	EXAMPLE LANGUAGE
Raise the subject <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ask Veteran about thoughts around alcohol use Ask permission to talk about alcohol use; and if, permission is granted: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Share that you are concerned about drinking above the recommended limits. Reflect the Veteran's responses that are consistent with changing drinking behavior. 	<p>"As your provider, I want to make sure you have all of the information you need to make decisions related to your wellbeing. What have you already heard about the effects of alcohol?"</p> <p>"What do you know about how alcohol can impact your health?"</p> <p>"Would it be okay if I tell you about some of the other risks we know about? Drinking above the recommended limits can have both short- and long-term effects on our physical and mental health."</p>
Express concern and provide feedback <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identify links between alcohol use and Veteran's co-occurring health conditions, if present (e.g., diabetes, mood disorders, insomnia, sexual dysfunction). Educate on safe limits of alcohol consumption and provide clear advice to cut down. 	<p>"I am concerned about the amount you are drinking and that it is putting you at risk of or going to lead to you [developing or worsening illness/symptoms or getting injured]. You can reduce this risk/improve your [health/symptoms/condition] by cutting down what you drink. But only you can decide if that is something you want to do." [Personal responsibility]</p>
Enhance motivation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ask the Veteran about what he/she thinks about the information you just shared. Enhance motivation to change and decrease or abstain from alcohol use. Reflect the Veteran's responses that are consistent with changing drinking behavior. 	<p>"What does this mean for you? What are your next steps?"</p> <p>"What do you see as the possible benefits of cutting down?"</p> <p>"What would be a reason to you that change would be worth considering?"</p> <p>If a Veteran expresses ambivalence, assure them that you can help when they are ready.</p>
Negotiate a plan Set a feasible drinking goal and arrive at a shared decision. Encourage specificity (e.g., drinks per day).	<p>"What changes are you willing to make to reach this goal?"</p>
Offer pharmacotherapy to patients with AUDIT-C ≥ 8 or ≥ 6 and current alcohol use disorder diagnosis	
Refer to treatment Advise treatment with pharmacotherapy (e.g., naltrexone, topiramate) or suggest referral, if appropriate.	<p>"Veterans sometimes struggle to quit or reduce their drinking. There are several medications and therapies that may help you. Would it be okay if I share more about these treatments?"</p>

AUDIT-C is found in the mental health assistant in CPRS; 15-30 min brief intervention CPT code: 99408

- Willenbring ML, Massey SH, Gardner MB. Helping patients who drink too much: an evidence-based guide for primary care clinicians. *Am Fam Physician*. 2009;80(1):44-50.
- Rubinsky AD, Kivlahan DR, Volk RJ, Maynard C, Bradley KA. Estimating risk of alcohol dependence using alcohol screening scores. *Drug Alcohol Depend*. 2010;108(1-2):29-36.
- Kaner EF, Beyer FR, Muirhead C, et al. Effectiveness of brief alcohol interventions in primary care populations. *Cochrane Database Syst Rev*. 2018;2(2):Cd004148.
- Veterans Health Administration, Department of Defense. VA/DoD practice guideline for the management of substance use disorders. Version 3.0. Washington (DC): The Management of Substance Use Disorders Working Group; 2009 January.
- Veterans Health Administration, Department of Defense. VA/DoD practice guideline for the management of substance use disorders. Version 4.0. Washington (DC): The Management of Substance Use Disorders Working Group; 2021 August.