

Alcohol and breast cancer



Key facts

- Alcohol is a carcinogen and causes at least 7 types of cancer, including breast cancer
- Breast cancer is the most common cancer in females
- More than 20,000 new cases of breast cancer are diagnosed in Australia each year
- Alcohol is estimated to cause more than 5% of breast cancer cases every year
- The risk of alcohol-related breast cancer increases the more alcohol you drink.
- You can reduce your risk of breast and other cancers by reducing the amount of alcohol you drink.

Alcohol and cancer

Like tobacco and asbestos, alcohol is a Group 1 carcinogen. This means that there is strong evidence that alcohol causes cancer.¹ When it breaks down in the body it forms the substance acetaldehyde which causes damage to cells.

Alcohol is known to cause at least seven types of cancer, including in the breast, bowel, liver, mouth and throat.¹

The risk of alcohol-related cancer increases with the amount of alcohol you drink.²

About breast cancer

Breast cancer refers to an uncontrolled growth of abnormal cells starting in breast tissue. The cancer cells may remain within the breast or spread to surrounding tissues such as lymph glands in the axilla (armpit) or to other parts of the body.³

Breast cancer is the most common cancer in females, with one in seven Australian women being diagnosed with breast cancer in their lifetime. On average, 57 Australians are diagnosed every day – that's more than 20,000 new cases annually.⁴

More than 80 per cent of cases occur in females over the age of 50, although it is also common in younger women.⁴

Globally more than two million new cases are diagnosed annually.⁵

In 2022 it is expected that more than 3,200 Australians will die from breast cancer.⁴ While the number of cases has increased over time, the mortality rate has declined.⁶ When national breast screening commenced in 1991 the number of breast cancers diagnosed increased rapidly. Earlier diagnosis and enhanced treatments have led to improved survival rates since that time.

Australians with breast cancer have better survival outcomes than counterparts in some other countries. Overall, 96% of Australians will survive at least five years if the cancer is limited to the breast tissue at the time of diagnosis.⁷

The link between alcohol and breast cancer

There are a number of risk factors for developing breast cancer, including some lifestyle or modifiable behaviours. Overall, alcohol use is the most significant modifiable risk factor for breast cancer, causing 12.6 per cent of cases in pre-menopausal women and 6.6 per cent of cases in post-menopausal women. This equates to more than 1,000 cases of alcohol-caused breast cancer every year in Australia.⁸

The evidence is strong that alcohol is a cause of breast cancer. The World Health Organization's International Agency for Research on Cancer investigates substances that may cause cancer, ranking the strength of evidence as either inconclusive, suggestive, probable or convincing. It found alcohol to be a *probable* cause for premenopausal breast cancer and a *convincing* cause for postmenopausal breast cancer.¹

Regular alcohol use increases the risk of breast cancer. Drinking one standard drink (10 grams of alcohol) per day on average increases the risk of breast cancer by up to nine per cent,⁹ and increased risk is associated with drinking less than one alcoholic drink daily.⁹ The type of alcohol consumed (wine, beer, spirits) does not alter the degree of risk.⁹

The increase in risk for all cancers from drinking one bottle of wine per week has been estimated as being the same as smoking 10 cigarettes per week, with breast cancer accounting for most of the increase.¹⁰

Based on the evidence, leading global health and scientific bodies recommend limiting alcohol consumption to reduce the risk of cancer.

It is important to note that alcohol is not the cause of every breast cancer. Drinking alcohol increases the risk of developing cancer. You can reduce the risk of breast and other cancers by reducing the amount you drink or not drinking alcohol.

Alcohol contributes to the development of breast cancer in a number of complex ways. These include through:

- damage to DNA caused by the toxic by-product of alcohol metabolism (acetaldehyde)
- influencing hormone levels, especially oestrogen
- increased absorption of other carcinogens caused by the solvent effect of alcohol¹¹

You can learn more by reading the Cancer Council's **information about how alcohol causes cancer**.

Reducing your risk

The National Health and Medical Research Council's **Australian Alcohol Guidelines**¹² recommend that for people who do drink alcohol, healthy adults should have no more than 10 standard alcoholic drinks in a week to reduce the risk of cancer and other diseases, and no more than 4 standard drinks on any one day to reduce the risk of injury or accident. The less you drink, the lower your risk of harm from alcohol, including cancer.

Some people, including those over age 60 and people with some chronic health conditions are at greater risk of harm from alcohol.

You can talk to your health care provider about how alcohol may affect your health.

What is a standard drink?

If you do drink alcohol, being aware of the number of standard drinks in a serve of alcohol can help you keep track of how much you are drinking. This depends on the alcohol volume (strength) and the size of the serve. A standard drink in Australia equates to 10 grams of pure alcohol.

- One small glass (285 ml middy or pot) of full-strength beer contains 1.1 standard drinks.
- An average sized glass of wine in a restaurant (150ml) contains about 1.6 standard drinks for white wine, and 1.8 standard drinks for red wine.
- One nip of spirits (30ml) contains one standard drink.

Every alcohol product in Australia is required to be labelled with the number of standard drinks that it contains. For more information on standard drinks see FARE's information sheet **Keeping track of standard drinks** at fare.org.au/resources.

KNOW YOUR STANDARD DRINKS



WINE
100ml
13% alcohol



SPARKLING WINE
100ml
13% alcohol



SPIRITS
30ml nip (shot glass)
40% alcohol



CIDER
285ml glass (pot/middy)
4.9% alcohol



BEER (FULL STRENGTH)
285ml glass (pot/middy)
4.9% alcohol



BEER (LIGHT)
425ml glass (schooner)
2.7% alcohol

Getting help

You don't have to make changes alone. If you need help cutting back on alcohol to reduce your risk, you can speak to a doctor.

You can find a local GP at www.healthdirect.gov.au or you can call 1800 022 222.

If you need other support to reduce your drinking, you can contact the National Alcohol and Other Drug Hotline on 1800 250 015.

For more support services visit fare.org.au/support.

References

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