



Alcohol and Cancer Risk

Alcohol use is one of the most important preventable risk factors for cancer, along with tobacco use and excess body weight. Alcohol use accounts for about 6% of all cancers and 4% of all cancer deaths in the United States. Yet many people don't know about the link between alcohol use and cancer.

The evidence indicates that the more alcohol a person drinks, particularly the more alcohol a person drinks regularly over time, the higher his or her risk of developing an alcohol-associated cancer.

How does alcohol raise my cancer risk?

When you drink alcohol, your body breaks it down into a chemical that damages your DNA. DNA is the cell's "instruction manual" that controls how a cell grows and does its job. When DNA is damaged, a cell can grow out of control and become a cancer.

Alcohol use has been linked with cancers of the:

Head and neck cancer

Drinking alcohol in moderate to heavy amounts is linked to an increased risk of specific head and neck cancers. The level of risk varies depending on the amount of alcohol consumed and the type of cancer. For example moderate drinking raises the risk of throat cancer by 1.8 times and voice box cancer by 1.4 times.

Esophageal cancer

Alcohol consumption at any level is associated with an increased risk of a type of esophageal cancer called esophageal squamous cell carcinoma. The risks, compared with no alcohol consumption, range from a 1.3-fold higher for light drinking to nearly 5-fold higher for heavy drinking. In addition, people who inherit a deficiency in an enzyme that metabolizes alcohol have been found to have substantially increased risks of esophageal squamous cell carcinoma if they consume alcohol.

Liver cancer

Heavy alcohol consumption is associated with approximately 2-fold increased risks of two types of liver cancer (hepatocellular carcinoma and intrahepatic cholangiocarcinoma.)



Colorectal cancer

Moderate to heavy alcohol consumption is associated with a 1.2-to-1.5-fold increased risk of cancers of the colon and rectum compared with no alcohol consumption.

Breast cancer

Studies have consistently found an increased risk of breast cancer with increasing alcohol intake. The risk increases based on alcohol consumption and can be between a 1.04-fold to 1.6-fold higher risk than in nondrinkers.

How can I lower my cancer risk?

You can drink less alcohol or choose not to drink.

Talk with your health care provider if you have concerns about your drinking.

Sources for more information

American Institute for Cancer Research



National Cancer Institute



American Cancer Society

