



Alcohol and Your Liver

Information for patients and families

Read this booklet to learn:

- what happens when you drink alcohol
- how it affects your liver
- how much alcohol is safe
- the signs of liver damage and what to do
- where you can get more information



Alcohol is in beer, wine and hard liquor. It can also be in some types of fermented (rotting) fruits. If liquor is used in cooking, those foods will have some alcohol in them. Alcohol is toxic to your body. This means it's harmful and affects how well your body works.

What happens when I drink alcohol?

When you drink alcohol, it goes right into your blood through the walls of your stomach and intestines. Once it's in your blood, it quickly spreads to your whole body.

Your liver helps remove things from your blood that are toxic such as alcohol. But your liver can only remove a certain amount of alcohol over a certain time. If you drink too much alcohol, the extra alcohol goes to your brain, heart, muscles and other body tissues.

How does alcohol affect my liver?

If you drink more alcohol than your liver can manage, the extra alcohol can destroy or change your liver cells. Some of these changes include:

- fat collecting in your liver cells, also called fatty liver
- inflammation (alcoholic hepatitis)
- permanent scarring (cirrhosis)

A severely scarred liver can lead to liver cancer or death.

How much alcohol is safe?

A safe amount of alcohol depends on a person's body weight, size and whether they are male or female. Women absorb more alcohol from each drink than men, so their risk of liver damage from alcohol is higher.

Having 2 to 3 alcoholic drinks every day and binge drinking can harm your liver. Binge drinking is when you drink more than 4 or 5 drinks in a row. If you already have a liver disease, you should stop drinking alcohol. There is no safe amount of alcohol for people with alcoholic liver disease.

Is one kind of alcohol safer than another?

No. The amount of alcohol you drink is important, not the kind of alcohol you drink.

1 drink is equal to:



12 ounces
(341 millilitres)
of beer

or



5 ounces
(142 millilitres)
of wine

or



1½ ounces
(43 millilitres)
of liquor

Women with healthy liver should not drink more than 1 alcoholic beverage a day (or 7 drinks in one week). Men with healthy liver should not drink more than 2 drinks a day (or 14 drinks in one week).

What happens when alcohol mixes with medicine?

Mixing alcohol and your medicines is dangerous. It can lead to severe damage to your liver. Never take alcohol and medicines together, especially medicines that have acetaminophen, like Tylenol.

Many prescribed and over-the-counter medicines interact with alcohol. This means when they are taken together, they affect each other.



It's dangerous to drink alcohol with medicines like:

- antibiotics
- blood thinners
- antidepressants
- sedatives
- pain medicines
- muscle relaxants



Talk to your health care provider or pharmacist about how your medicines can interact with alcohol.

How do I know if my liver has been damaged by alcohol?

You won't feel anything is wrong until most (75%) of your liver has been damaged. By then, it may be too late to do anything about it.

It's important to see your doctor and be honest about how much alcohol you drink so any liver damage can be found early. Regular check-ups and blood tests can help your doctor find early signs of liver disease.

What will happen to my body if my liver isn't working properly?

Your entire body will be affected if your liver isn't working properly. Symptoms and problems caused by a badly damaged liver include:

- feeling very tired
- losing your appetite
- not being able to fight infections very well
- yellowing of your skin and eyes (jaundice)
- swelling of your stomach area
- bruising
- feeling confused
- kidney failure

If I have liver damage caused by alcohol, can it be reversed or cured?

Anyone who drinks alcohol regularly or heavily can damage their liver. This damage can be mild, like fatty liver. Or, it can be serious, like alcoholic hepatitis and/or cirrhosis.

Mild liver disease, like fatty liver can be reversed completely if a person stops drinking alcohol. When there is no alcohol in your blood for several months, the liver cells can return to normal.

Serious liver disease, like alcoholic hepatitis and cirrhosis usually damage your liver forever. But, even in these cases, you can usually live a normal life if you stop drinking alcohol completely and take medicines to manage your liver problems.

In some cases, once serious liver disease starts it can continue to cause liver damage, even if you stop drinking and take medicines. This can lead to early death.

What should I do if I think I have liver damage caused by alcohol?

- Stop drinking alcohol right away.
- See your doctor and be honest about how much alcohol you are drinking.
- Make sure your doctor does blood tests to see if your liver is healthy and to make sure nothing else is harming your liver.

Where can I get more information?

[Canadian Liver Foundation](#)