

# 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



## **About alcohol and your liver**

Alcohol is in beer, wine and hard liquor. It is the ingredient that can make you drunk. Alcohol is also found in some types of fermented fruits. If liquor is used in cooking, those foods will have some alcohol in them. Alcohol is toxic or harmful to your body and affects the way your body works. Alcohol can also be addictive.

## **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 including the brain, heart and muscles.

It can rapidly affect the way you think and behave. Although drinking small amounts can make you feel happy and relaxed, drinking larger amounts impairs your judgment, makes you lose balance and coordination, and makes it hard to walk. These are just some of the effects that alcohol has on the body.

After an alcoholic drink, the level of alcohol in your blood rises. This alcohol level is called "blood alcohol concentration". It is the test that police do at a roadside breath test. The more alcohol you drink, the more risk you put to yourself and your health.

## **How does alcohol affect my liver?**

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

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

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

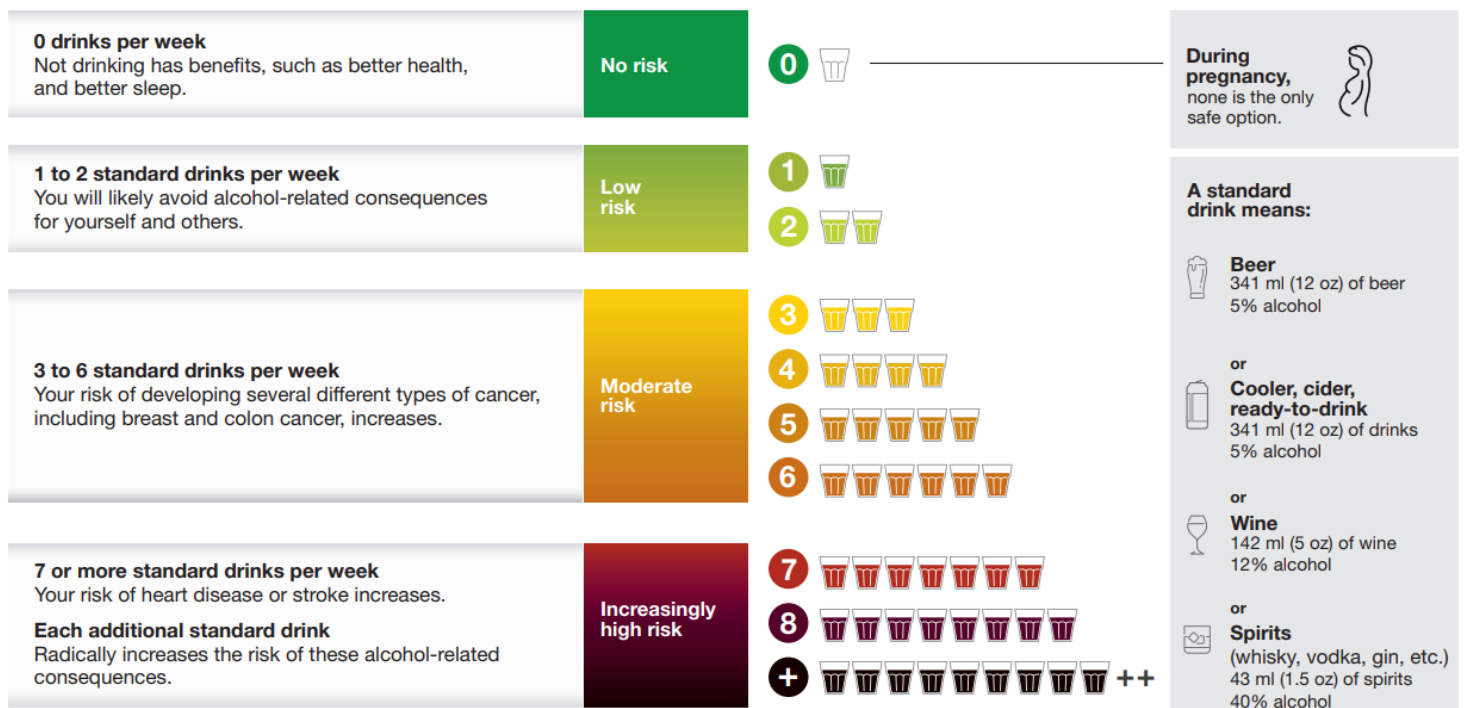
## How much alcohol is safe?

There is no safe amount of alcohol for anyone. Even a small amount of any type of alcohol can harm your overall health.

The 2023 Canada’s Guidance on Alcohol and Health has no drinking amount recommendations. Instead, it associates the number of drinks per week to health risk level. Having 1 to 2 standard drinks per week is low risk of developing alcohol-related health consequences such as liver and heart disease, and certain types of cancer.

## Alcohol consumption per week

Drinking alcohol has negative consequences. The more alcohol you drink per week, the more the consequences add up to.



\*Adapted with permission from Canada’s Guidance on Alcohol and Health Infographic See the full size CGHA Drinking Less is Better at <https://www.ccsa.ca/canadas-guidance-alcohol-and-health-public-summary-drinking-less-better-infographic>

## What happens when alcohol mixes with medicine?

Mixing alcohol and medicine 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, even herbal supplements can interact with alcohol. This means when they are taken together, they affect each other. For example, alcohol can lower the effectiveness of the medicines you take.



### **Some examples of medicines that are dangerous to drink with alcohol:**

- antibiotics
- antihistamines
- blood thinners
- anti-depressants
- sedatives
- pain medicines
- blood pressure medicine
- cough medicines

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
- easy 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. The damage can be mild, like simple fatty liver. Or, it can be serious, like alcoholic hepatitis, cirrhosis, or both.

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 a period of time, 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 severe cases where the liver stops working properly, your liver may not recover, even if you stop drinking and this can lead to 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.
- ✓ Talk to your doctor if it's difficult for you to stop drinking alcohol.

## Where can I get more information?

### Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction

Website: <https://ccsa.ca/canadas-guidance-alcohol-and-health>

### Canadian Liver Foundation

Website: <https://www.liver.ca/patients-caregivers/liver-diseases>

### CAMH

Website: <https://www.camh.ca/en/health-info/mental-illness-and-addiction-index/alcohol>

### UHN Rapid Access Addiction Medicine Clinics

Website: [https://www.uhn.ca/MentalHealth/Clinics/Rapid\\_Access\\_Addiction\\_Medicine](https://www.uhn.ca/MentalHealth/Clinics/Rapid_Access_Addiction_Medicine)



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