

How Much Alcohol Is Too Much?

Thursday, January 28, 2021



What counts as a drink?

Contrary to popular belief, drinking beer or wine is not safer than a shot of liquor. Rather, think about *how much* alcohol is in your drink, and not the *type* of alcohol you drink. In the US, one standard drink usually has about 14 grams (or 0.6 ounces) of pure alcohol. This amount of pure alcohol is generally found in 12 ounces of beer (usually 5% alcohol), 8 ounces of malt liquor (7% alcohol), 5 ounces of wine (12% alcohol), and 1.5 ounces or a “shot” of distilled spirit or liquor (40% alcohol).

Alcohol infographic

Adapted from the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism.

When drinking goes beyond moderation

You may have heard the terms *heavy drinking* or *binge drinking*, but wonder what the difference is. Excessive alcohol consumption includes heavy drinking and binge drinking. **Heavy drinking** is defined as having 15 or more drinks per week for men and 8 drinks or more per week for women.

Binge drinking is defined as a pattern of drinking that raises a person's blood alcohol concentration (BAC) level to 0.08% or more. For men, this usually happens after having 5 or more drinks on a single occasion (within about 2 hours). For women, it's 4 or more drinks over the same amount of time.

Binge drinking is the most common and deadly form of excessive alcohol use in the US, and can lead to unintentional injuries (such as car accidents, falls, or alcohol poisoning), violence, and sexually transmitted diseases, among many other health problems.

Alcohol poisoning

When a person binge drinks, he or she is at risk for alcohol poisoning. **Alcohol poisoning** happens when a person has so much alcohol in his or her bloodstream that key bodily functions such as breathing, heart rate, and temperature control begin to shut down.

Alcohol poisoning is serious, and can be deadly. If you suspect someone has alcohol poisoning, call 911 right away.

Signs of alcohol poisoning may include:

- Confusion.
- Coma, or unable to wake up.
- Throwing up.
- Seizures.
- Slow breathing (fewer than 8 breaths every minute).
- Irregular breathing (taking 10 seconds or more between breaths).
- Extremely low body temperature, bluish skin color, or paleness.

Keep in mind that a person with alcohol poisoning does not need to have all the symptoms listed above.

Alcohol use disorder (alcoholism)

Alcohol use disorder (previously known as alcoholism) is a chronic disease that affects about 17 million people in the US. People who drink excessively do not necessarily have alcohol use disorder.

Signs of alcohol use disorder include:

- Not being able to limit drinking.
- Drinking even when it is causing personal or professional problems.
- Needing to drink more to get the same effects.
- Wanting to drink so badly that a person can't think about anything else.

How do you know if it's okay to drink?

According to the Dietary Guidelines for Americans, it is not safe to drink alcoholic beverages if you are:

- Younger than 21 years of age.
- A woman who is or may be pregnant.
- Driving or participating in activities that require coordination or alertness.
- Taking certain prescription or over-the-counter medicines.
- Managing certain medical conditions.

- Recovering from alcoholism or unable to control the amount you drink.

How to get help

If you think you have a problem with alcohol, talk with your healthcare provider. Doing so can enable your healthcare provider to work with you to develop a plan to help you.

The National Drug and Alcohol Treatment Referral Routing Service (1-800-662-HELP) can also provide information about treatment programs near you.

[\[1\]](#) [\[2\]](#) [\[3\]](#) [\[4\]](#) [\[5\]](#) [\[6\]](#)

References

- **1.** Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Frequently Asked Questions. Accessed September 19, 2017.
- **2.** National Institutes of Health: National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism. Accessed September 20, 2017.
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- **6.** Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Fact Sheets: Binge Drinking. Accessed December 6, 2017.

Originally published, Thursday, January 28, 2021