

# Alcohol and Cancer Risk

## Key Messages

Drinking alcohol increases the risk of many cancers including breast cancer, bowel cancer and cancers of the liver and upper digestive tract (mouth, throat, larynx and oesophagus).

In terms of cancer risk, there is no safe level of alcohol intake. Even having one or two drinks a day is enough to increase the risk of certain cancers. The more alcohol consumed, the greater the risk.

Cutting down on drinking, particularly binge drinking, is a good way to reduce cancer risk and improve overall health.

The Cancer Society recommends: For people who drink alcohol, the recommended amounts are an average of no more than 2 standard drinks a day for men, and an average of no more than 1 standard drink a day for women. A standard drink contains 10g alcohol, and is equal to 285mL full strength beer, 450mL of low alcohol (light) beer, 100mL wine and 30mL spirits.

## Alcohol is one of the most well established causes of cancer

There is *convincing* evidence that alcohol is associated with an increased risk of cancers of the mouth, pharynx, larynx, oesophagus, colorectum (in men) and breast. Alcohol *probably* increases the risk of colorectal cancer in women and liver cancer. It is also possible that alcohol increases the risk of lung cancer.

The risk varies between different types of cancer, and also depends on how much alcohol is consumed. Heavy drinkers are at greatest risk, but even one or two drinks a day can increase the risk of some cancers.

## Evidence of Increased Risk:

### 1. Breast Cancer

Breast cancer is the most common cancer for women, and kills about 600 New Zealand women every year.

Over a hundred studies have looked at the relationship between alcohol consumption and breast cancer, and the results consistently show that the more women drink, the greater their risk. The latest evidence shows that drinking 50g of alcohol daily (approximately four drinks), increases the risk of breast cancer by 50% compared with non-drinkers. Even as little as one or two drinks a day is enough to significantly increase breast cancer risk.

Other established risk factors for breast cancer are smoking, gaining weight and being overweight. So maintaining a healthy weight, quitting smoking and cutting down on alcohol are three important steps towards reducing breast cancer risk.

### 2. Bowel Cancer

New Zealand has high rates of colorectal (bowel) cancer, which is the second most common cancer for both men and women.

The relationship between alcohol and bowel cancer has been examined in over fifty studies, and there is growing evidence that alcohol is one of the factors that increases risk. Research shows that people who have four drinks a day (50g of alcohol) have a 40%

higher chance of getting bowel cancer compared with non-drinkers.

A healthy diet is also important for reducing risk of bowel cancer, since diets that are high in red or cured meat are associated with bowel cancer (Gonzalez, 2006). Eating plenty of fruit, vegetables and whole grains, and cutting down on red meat and alcohol can reduce risk.

### **3. Cancer of the Upper Digestive Tract and Liver**

It has been known for many years that alcohol increases the risk for cancers of the oral cavity (mouth), pharynx (throat), larynx (voice box) and oesophagus (food pipe). Research shows that people who have four drinks a day (50g of alcohol) are two to three times more likely to get these cancers than non-drinkers.

There is also consistent evidence that drinking increases the risk of liver cancer, but it is difficult to say exactly what the risk is because people often get other liver problems before liver cancer appears, and cut down their drinking as a result.

### **4 Note: Smoking and drinking together multiplies your cancer risk**

There is growing evidence that alcohol may increase the toxic effects of other cancer-causing substances, particularly tobacco. This means the combined effects of smoking and alcohol greatly exceed the risk from either one of these factors alone. The risks of cancers of the upper digestive and respiratory tracts for people who smoke and drink are multiplied.

### **Frequently Asked Questions:**

#### **1. Are some alcoholic drinks more harmful than others?**

Alcohol comes in many different forms: beer, wine, spirits (e.g. gin, vodka, rum, and tequila), ready-to-drinks, sherry, cider, cocktails and liqueurs, for example. It is the alcohol content that causes

cancer. The type of alcoholic drink makes little or no difference.

Changing to drinks with lower-alcohol content (e.g. light beer) may reduce the cancer risk by reducing the total amount of alcohol consumed.

#### **2. What is a safe level of drinking?**

There is no level of drinking that can be called safe for all people at all times. The level that is safe for any one person depends on age, gender, body size, food intake, general health, and family history of cancer, heart disease, alcoholism and other diseases.

As well as increasing the risk of certain cancers, drinking alcohol (particularly binge drinking) is associated with other risks: accidents and injuries, mental health problems and suicide, crime and violence, unwanted pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases, drowning, and road deaths.

It is recommended that pregnant women do not drink alcohol at all, because drinking while pregnant can harm the unborn baby.

#### **3. What if I have all of my drinks on the weekend?**

The evidence is clear - binge drinking is bad for health. It is much safer to have a small amount of alcohol often than to have a lot of alcohol in one day. Having more than six drinks in one sitting for men, or four drinks in one sitting for women, is not recommended.

#### **4. How can I enjoy myself and drink less?**

Alcohol can play a big part in our social lives, but there are plenty of ways to cut down on drinking without cutting down on fun. Here are some ideas for social occasions:

- Have an alcohol-free night by volunteering to be the sober driver.
- Alternate alcoholic drinks with water, and make the first drink a non-alcoholic one
- Eat before drinking, and while drinking

- Use a wine or beer glass but fill it with a non-alcoholic alternative
- For a BYO event, take a favourite soft drink as well as (or instead of) alcoholic drinks
- Count the number of drinks you have

There are also simple ways to increase the number of alcohol-free days each week, for example:

- Do more activities that don't involve drinking
- Spend more time with friends who don't drink
- Tell friends

If having a drink is an after-work ritual, think of healthier daily 'treats' that could serve the same purpose. Call a friend, relax with a lime and soda or have a bath instead. Create a new ritual that helps the unwinding process without increasing cancer risk.

For other ideas to reduce drinking see the Alcohol Liquor Advisory Council website [www.alcohol.org.nz](http://www.alcohol.org.nz) or call the Alcohol Drug Helpline: **0800 787 797** for free, confidential advice and resources to help you cut down.

For sources of evidence quoted in the resource and more in-depth information see the Cancer Society Position Statement on Alcohol and Cancer

**Revised March 2009**