



Alcohol and Cancer



Basic description

Research shows that alcohol consumption is linked to an increased chance of developing certain cancers. The more alcohol a person consumes, the higher his or her risk of developing some kinds of cancer. The way alcohol causes cancer is not completely understood. It could be that alcohol itself causes cancer by increasing hormone levels or it may be carcinogenic because of the way it is metabolized, which can make cells more vulnerable to other carcinogens, like tobacco.

Strength of evidence

Many research studies have established the relationship between alcohol use and cancer. Risks due to alcohol vary depending on the kind of cancer. The strongest associations between alcohol use and cancer are with mouth, esophageal, laryngeal, pharyngeal, breast, and liver cancers. People who drink heavily and smoke cigarettes or use other kinds of tobacco are at even higher risk for most of these cancers.

Cancers affected

Oral and pharyngeal cancers are more common in alcohol users than in non-alcohol users. Most patients with oral cancer consume alcohol frequently. Smokers who also drink are at much higher risk. Although the combination of tobacco and alcohol use significantly increases the risk of developing esophageal cancer, alcohol use alone also increases the risk of developing the disease.

Alcohol is also a primary cause of liver cancer. Deaths from liver cancer are higher among heavy alcohol users than among individuals who do not drink. By altering the liver's ability to metabolize some carcinogenic substances into harmless compounds or to disable certain existing carcinogens, alcohol's effects may influence not only liver cancer but other cancers as well.

Many studies have found an association between alcohol use and the risk of breast cancer. The risk increases with the amount of alcohol consumed. It is highest among heavy alcohol users, but even a few drinks a week may increase a person's risk.

Several studies suggest that alcohol may cause some colorectal cancers, but the evidence is not yet conclusive.

Opportunities for risk reduction

Drinking alcohol in moderation is key to reducing the risk of alcohol-related cancers. The more someone drinks, the higher his or her risk of developing some kinds of cancer. Reducing the amount of alcohol a person drinks may reduce cancer risk. Because of the relationship between alcohol and tobacco, quitting smoking may also reduce the effect of alcohol on oral, esophageal, pharyngeal, and laryngeal cancers.

Although higher levels of alcohol consumption have been associated with some forms of cancer, moderate alcohol intake (two drinks per day for men and one drink per day for women) may decrease the risk of heart disease and stroke. The cardiovascular benefits of moderate drinking may outweigh the risk of cancer in some men and women; however, adults who do not currently drink alcoholic beverages should not start drinking alcohol in hopes of reducing their risk for heart disease. Cardiovascular risk can be reduced by not smoking, eating a diet low in saturated fat (mainly found in animal sources such as meat and dairy products), maintaining a healthy weight, being physically active on a regular basis, and controlling blood pressure and cholesterol levels. Men and women should discuss and weigh their risks of heart disease, stroke, and cancer with their health care provider, while also considering other lifestyle options (such as physical activity and good nutrition) for reducing risk for these diseases.

Emerging trends

Emerging trends in the area of alcohol and cancer research include:

Basic research Research is beginning to focus on the mechanisms by which alcohol causes or induces human cancer and, therefore, how to prevent it. Scientists are also conducting research to determine the impact that folic acid may have in reducing the increased risk of breast cancer from alcohol consumption.

Specific cancers A number of studies are focusing on the role alcohol may play in the development of breast, colorectal, and other cancers.

Additional resources

To learn more about alcohol and cancer and the American Cancer Society's programs, please call our toll-free number at 1-800-227-2345 or visit our Web site at www.cancer.org.

Additional information on alcohol and cancer may be found at:

- **National Cancer Institute
Cancer Information Service**
Toll-free number: 1-800-422-6237
Web site: www.cancer.gov
- **National Institute on Alcohol Abuse
and Alcoholism**
Web site: www.niaaa.nih.gov

Bottom line

Limiting the amount of alcohol a person drinks may help lower the risk of a number of cancers. If alcohol is consumed, men should have no more than two drinks per day, and women should have no more than one. In addition, the combined use of alcohol and tobacco greatly increases the risk of oral, laryngeal, pharyngeal, and esophageal cancers.

Alcohol and Cancer



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by finding cures, and by fighting back.

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