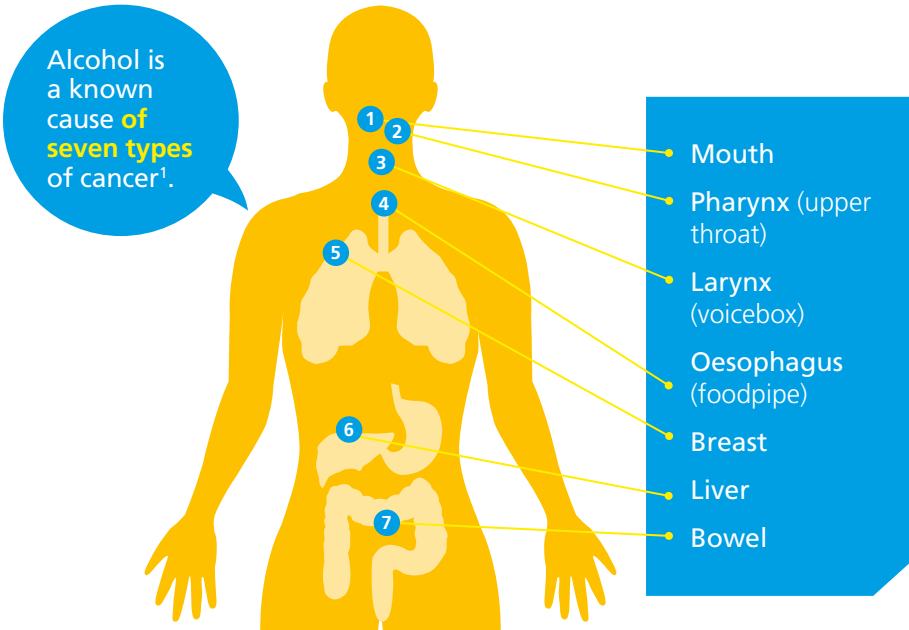


# Alcohol, Cancer and Your Health



Drink less,  
reduce your risk.

# Alcohol and cancer



**Around 900 people are diagnosed with alcohol-related cancers in Ireland and around 500 people die from these diseases each year<sup>2</sup>.**

You can reduce your chance of getting cancer if you avoid alcohol or only drink a little.

It's not just people who have a drinking problem who are affected.

Even a small amount of alcohol can increase your risk of cancer. The more you drink, the higher your risk.

<sup>1</sup> World Health Organisation's International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC) Review of scientific evidence 2010.

<sup>2</sup> Laffoy M., Mc Carthy T., Mullen L., Byrne D., Martin J., Cancer Incidence and Mortality due to Alcohol: An Analysis of 10-Year Data; Ir Med J. 2013; 106 (10) 294-297.

## Avoid alcohol or drink less

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### There is no safe amount of alcohol when it comes to cancer risk, but the less you drink the lower your risk.

You can limit your risk by drinking no more than 1 standard drink a day if you are a woman, and 2 standard drinks a day if you are a man.



A glass of stout, lager or cider (284ml)  
A small glass of wine (100ml)  
A single measure of spirits (35ml)



No more than  
**2** standard  
drinks a day



**1** standard  
drink a day

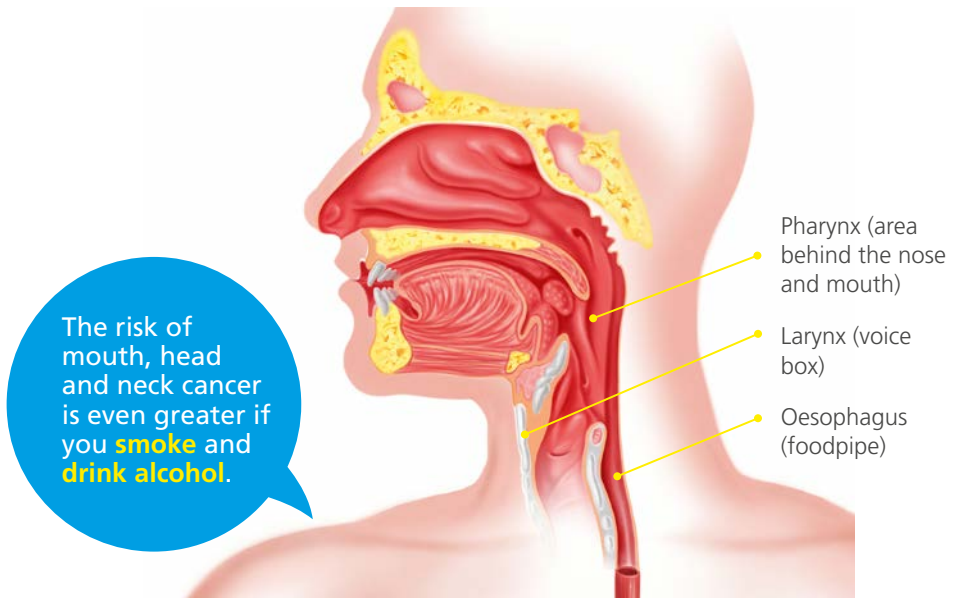
Have at least **2 alcohol-free days** every week.  
It's important to give your body a break.



Research shows that drinking alcohol increases the risk of cancer whether you drink it all in one go or spread it throughout the week.

# What do we know about alcohol and cancer?

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## Mouth, head and neck cancer

Alcohol is a major risk factor for certain head and neck cancers, particularly mouth cancer, throat cancer and cancer of the larynx (voice box). People who have 3 or 4 standard drinks a day increase their risk of cancer by 2 to 3 times. The risk of mouth, head and neck cancer is even greater if you smoke as well.

## Oesophageal cancer

Alcohol is a major risk factor for a particular type of oesophageal cancer called oesophageal squamous cell carcinoma. If you both drink **and** smoke, your risk of oesophageal cancer is far higher than from just drinking or smoking.

**There are other reasons people get cancer, but alcohol is a risk factor we can control.**

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<sup>3</sup> Laffoy M., Mc Carthy T., Mullen L., Byrne D., Martin J., Cancer Incidence and Mortality due to Alcohol: An Analysis of 10-Year Data; Ir Med J. 2013; 106 (10) 294-297.

<sup>4</sup> Seitz, H., et al. Epidemiology and pathophysiology of alcohol and breast cancer: Update 2012. Alcohol and Alcoholism, 2012.

# What do we know about alcohol and cancer?

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## Breast cancer

Alcohol is responsible for 1 in 8 breast cancers in Ireland.<sup>3</sup> Even small amounts of alcohol can increase the risk of breast cancer. A recent review of evidence showed that even 1 standard drink a day could increase the risk of breast cancer by 5 per cent. The risk increases the more a woman drinks.<sup>4</sup>

## Liver cancer

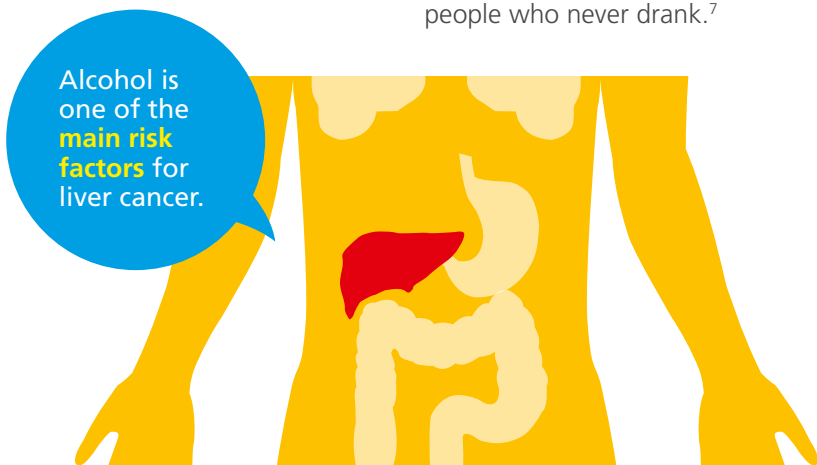
Alcohol is one of the main risk factors for liver cancer. Heavy drinking can lead to cirrhosis. This is scarring of the liver as a result of continuous, long-term liver damage. Cirrhosis increases the risk of liver cancer.

Alcohol also further increases the risk of liver cancer in people with hepatitis B or C infections (who are already at higher risk).

## Bowel cancer

There is clear evidence of a link between drinking alcohol and bowel cancer.<sup>5</sup> It's estimated that 6% of bowel cancer cases are caused by alcohol.<sup>6</sup>

Your risk of bowel cancer increases the more you drink. Research studies have shown that people who regularly drink 3 or 4 drinks a day have a 1.5 times higher risk of bowel cancer than people who never drank.<sup>7</sup>



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<sup>5</sup> The World Cancer Research Fund / American Institute for Cancer Research Continuous Update Project Expert Report 2018

<sup>6</sup> Brown KF, Runggay H, Dunlop C, et al. [www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/29567982](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/29567982) "The fraction of cancer attributable to known risk factors in England, Wales, Scotland, Northern Ireland, and the UK overall in 2015. British Journal of Cancer 2018

<sup>7</sup> Ferrari, P, et al. Lifetime and baseline alcohol intake and risk of colon and rectal cancers in the European Prospective Investigation into cancer and nutrition (EPIC). Int J Cancer, 2007.

# How does alcohol cause cancer?



## Alcohol causes different types of cancer in different ways

### DNA damage



Our bodies break down alcohol into a toxic chemical called acetaldehyde. Acetaldehyde can damage DNA (the genetic material in our cells) and stop our cells from repairing damage.

The breakdown of alcohol in our bodies can also generate harmful molecules called reactive oxygen species. These molecules can damage DNA and proteins.

### Loss of nutrients

Alcohol weakens the body's ability to break down and absorb nutrients that may help to reduce your risk of cancer. These include folic acid and vitamins A, C, D and E.

Alcohol is high in calories and can cause you to put on weight.

### Increasing oestrogen

Alcohol increases levels of the hormone oestrogen. Higher levels of oestrogen increase the risk of breast cancer.

Being overweight or obese increases the risk of many types of cancer.



## Some other facts about drinking alcohol

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If you drink alcohol **and** smoke, your risk of cancer is **far higher**.

Alcohol makes it easier for other harmful chemicals, such as those found in tobacco smoke, to enter the cells lining the mouth, throat, larynx (voicebox) and oesophagus (foodpipe).

This is why the combination of smoking and drinking increases the risk of cancers in the mouth, throat, larynx and oesophagus.

**If you both drink and smoke, your risk of getting these cancers is far higher.**

**Drinking and smoking together account for about three-quarters of oral cancer cases in Europe<sup>8</sup>.**

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<sup>8</sup> Talamini, R., Bosetti, C., La Vecchia, C. et al. Cancer Causes Control (2002) 13: 957.  
<https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1021944123914>

## Some other facts about drinking alcohol

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Alcohol increases the risk of developing more than

**60 diseases**

and medical conditions.

Even drinking small amounts can increase risk.

**On average 88 deaths every month in Ireland are directly linked to alcohol<sup>9</sup>.**

**3 in 4 people**

in Ireland have drunk alcohol in the last 12 months.

**Over half**

of drinkers (55%) drink alcohol at least once a week.

**1 in 3 drinkers**

(30%) drink on several days each week.



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<sup>9</sup> Long, J., and Mongan, D., Alcohol Consumption in Ireland 2013, Health Research Board.



# Are some drinks more harmful than others?

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All types of **alcohol** increase the risk of cancer, including red wine.



It is the alcohol itself that does the damage. It does not matter if it is in the form of beer, wine or spirits.

## Harmful drinking

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Irish adults binge drink more than adults in any other European country.

Binge drinking means drinking **6 or more** standard drinks on one occasion.



Binge drinking is a form of harmful drinking that is likely to increase the risk of accidents, injuries, violence and poisoning. It also increases the risk of health problems like heart problems and liver damage.

1 in 3 drinkers (37%) binge drink on a typical drinking occasion.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Long, J., and Mongan, D., Alcohol Consumption in Ireland 2013, Health Research Board.

# Alcohol and calories

## Alcohol is high in calories and can cause weight gain



Bottle of wine

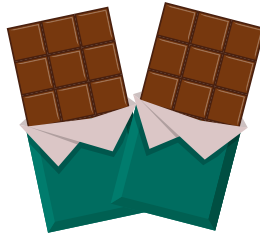
To stay the same weight:

**Men:** Need about **2,500 calories** a day.

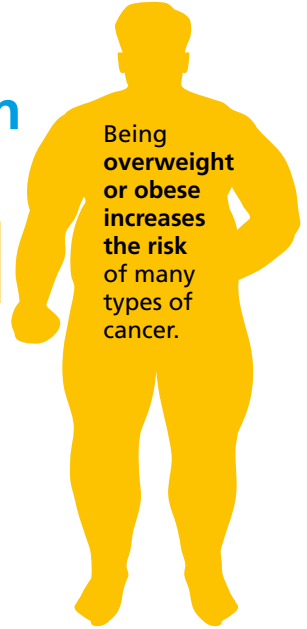
**Women:** Need about **2,000 calories** a day.



=



Two bars of chocolate



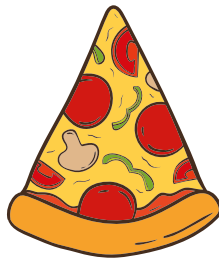
Being **overweight or obese** increases the risk of many types of cancer.

There are around **600 calories** in a bottle of wine and **200** in a pint of normal-strength beer.



Pint of beer

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Slice of pizza

## Alcohol calories are empty calories

– they don't make you feel full up like food calories do.

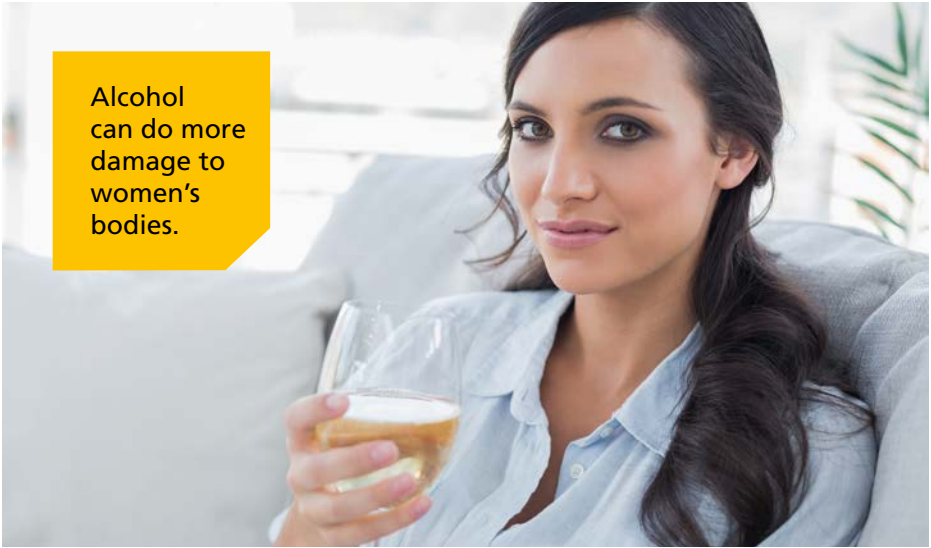
**Alcohol affects the part of the brain that makes us feel hungry**, so we may eat more after drinking.

**Alcohol lowers blood sugar**, which can leave us feeling hungry.

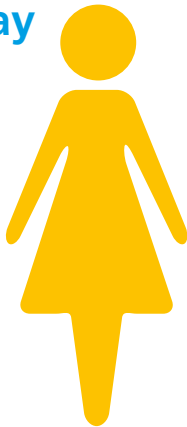
## Why should women drink less than men?

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Alcohol can do more damage to women's bodies.



**Even  
1 standard  
drink a day  
increases  
the risk  
of breast  
cancer.**



Alcohol can do more damage to women's bodies.

Compared to men, women have:

- Less body water
- More body fat
- Fewer of the enzymes that break down alcohol.

In general, if a woman drinks the same amount as a man, she will have a higher concentration of alcohol in her blood and the alcohol will stay in her body longer, doing more damage.

Health problems from alcohol tend to happen earlier in women.

## The benefits of cutting down

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# As well as reducing your risk of cancer, there are many other benefits to cutting down on alcohol

- Manage your weight better
- Have healthier skin
- Sleep better
- Have more energy
- Have more money
- Have improved mental health
- Have a lower risk of stroke and heart disease.



# Track your drinking

## Alcohol diary

If you drink, use the box below to write in any alcohol you drank in the last week. Then work out how many standard drinks you drank.



A glass of stout, lager or cider (284ml)  
A small glass of wine (100ml)  
A single measure of spirits (35ml)

Date	What alcoholic drinks did you have today?	How many standard drinks is this?
Monday		
Tuesday		
Wednesday		
Thursday		
Friday		
Saturday		
Sunday		
<b>Total</b>		

There are plenty of smartphone apps to help you track your drinking – or use a notebook or kitchen calendar.



To reduce your cancer risk, drink no more than 2 standard drinks a day (men) or 1 standard drink a day (women).

## Tips to drink less on a night out

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- Go out later
- Bring less money
- Order smaller drinks – a glass or bottle rather than a pint, a single measure of spirits rather than a double
- Pick lower strength drinks or use more mixer in your drinks
- Avoid top-ups, so that you can keep track of how many you're drinking
- Alternate alcoholic and non-alcoholic drinks
- Don't drink too fast – sip your drinks and wait a while before ordering another
- Avoid buying rounds. Or buy yourself a soft drink or a non-alcoholic drink when it's your round
- Leave your drink unfinished if you're going home or you've had enough.



## Tips to drink less at home

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- **Keep alcohol-free drinks at home**
- **Use a standard measure for spirits, rather than pouring freehand**
- **Start drinking a bit later – go for a walk, have a shower or do something else first**
- **Change your routine to find new things to do at your usual drinking times**
- **Don't stock up on cheap alcohol offers. Just buy what you need, or consider not buying alcohol in your weekly shopping**
- **Use smaller glasses. Many glasses hold much more than 1 standard drink.**

# 12 ways to reduce your risk of cancer

1

## Do not smoke

1 in 3 cancers is related to smoking. Cut out the cigarettes and cut your cancer risk.



2

## Avoid second-hand smoke

Keep your home and workplace smoke free. Second-hand smoke increases the risk of lung cancer and heart disease in non-smokers.



3

## Be a healthy weight

Being overweight puts you at higher risk of some of the most common cancers. Keep a healthy weight by eating well and being active.



4

## Be physically active in every life

Limit the time you spend sitting and aim for at least 30 minutes of moderate physical activity a day.



**Did you know that about half of all cancers could be avoided?**

5

## Have a healthy diet

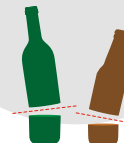
Eat fruit, vegetables, whole grains, beans and seeds. Limit foods high in sugar, salt and fat. Avoid processed meat and limit red meat.



6

## Avoid alcohol

Cut back – or even better – avoid alcohol completely to reduce your risk.





7

### Avoid too much sun

Protect yourself from UV rays, which cause skin cancer. Cover up outdoors with clothes, hats and sunglasses. Use sunscreen and avoid sunbeds.



8

### Pollutants

Always follow health and safety instructions to reduce the risk from pollutants like asbestos, benzene, diesel engine exhaust, arsenic and formaldehyde.



9

### Radiation

Find out if you are exposed to radiation from naturally high radon levels in your home and what steps to take.

See [www.epa.ie/radon](http://www.epa.ie/radon)



10

### Advice for women

Breastfeed if possible to reduce your cancer risk. Limit your use of hormone replacement therapy (HRT) treatment, as it can increase the risk of certain cancers.



11

### Get vaccinations

Some cancers are linked to viruses. Make sure your children get vaccinated against Human papillomavirus (HPV) at age 12/13 and Hepatitis B (for babies).



12

### Get screened for cancer

Take part in organised cancer screening programmes for bowel cancer (men and women), breast cancer (women) and cervical cancer (women).  
[www.cancerscreening.ie](http://www.cancerscreening.ie).



**Always go to the doctor if you notice any unusual changes in your body.**

## Information and support services

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- **www.askaboutalcohol.ie** Website from the Health Service Executive (HSE) with information on how much we're drinking, how alcohol affects our physical and mental health and how we can gain more by drinking less.
- **HSE Drugs and Alcohol Helpline** 1800 459 459 | Mon to Fri 9:30am – 5.30pm. Email **helpline@hse.ie**. This is a free and confidential helpline and email support service offering information, guidance and referral to anyone with a question or concern related to alcohol and drug use.
- **Al-Anon** For relatives and friends of problem drinkers. Tel: 01 873 2699, every day 10am – 10pm. **www.al-anon.org**
- **Alateen** For children of problem drinkers. Tel: 01 873 2699, every day 10am – 10pm. **www.al-anon-ireland.org/alateen**
- **Alcoholics Anonymous** A fellowship of men and women who share their experience, strength and hope with each other, so that they may solve their common problems and help others to recover from alcoholism. Tel: 01 842 0700  
**www.alcoholicsanonymous.ie**

# Irish Cancer Society

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**To find out more about alcohol and cancer or about cancer in general:**

- Visit us at **[www.cancer.ie](http://www.cancer.ie)**
- Call our Cancer Nurseline on Freephone 1800 200 700 and speak to one of our cancer nurses for confidential advice, support and information. You can also email us on **[cancernurseline@irishcancer.ie](mailto:cancernurseline@irishcancer.ie)** or visit our Online Community at **[www.cancer.ie](http://www.cancer.ie)**
- Talk to a cancer nurse at one of **Daffodil Centres**, located in 13 hospitals nationwide.

**To keep in touch with the Irish Cancer Society's activities, including cancer prevention campaigns and messages:**



Like us on Facebook: **[www.facebook.com/IrishCancerSociety](http://www.facebook.com/IrishCancerSociety)**



Follow us on Twitter: **<https://twitter.com/IrishCancerSoc>**

Cancer Nurseline  
Freephone 1800 200 700

[www.cancer.ie](http://www.cancer.ie)

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