

Getting older and alcohol



Developed in association with



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Older people are more at risk

As we get older, our bodies are less able to break down alcohol and we are more likely to feel the harmful effects of alcohol on our health and wellbeing. Over time, the same amount of alcohol can have a greater effect even if our drinking habits have stayed the same.

Cutting down on your alcohol consumption and avoiding heavy drinking days can help to stop problems developing or getting worse.

Alcohol and your health

As we age, we are more likely to experience health problems. We are also more likely to need to take medicines, while our risk of many conditions increases. Because of these health changes, we do not tolerate alcohol as well as younger adults, and we may experience more harm from alcohol.

Alcohol and cancer

Alcohol increases your risk of several types of cancers such as mouth, throat, bowel and liver cancer.

There is no 'safe' level of alcohol when it comes to cancer, but the less you drink, the lower your risk of developing alcohol related cancers.

If you drink and smoke, your chances of getting cancer of the mouth, throat or oesophagus (food pipe) are far greater.

Alcohol and liver disease

Drinking more than the low-risk guidelines roughly doubles your risk of cirrhosis of the liver (liver disease) and also increases your risk of liver cancer. Most heavy drinkers have a build-up of harmful fat and inflammation in their livers.

Alcohol and your heart

Regular or high-risk drinking can lead to diseases of the heart muscle called cardiomyopathy. High-risk drinking can also lead to increased blood pressure, heart disease and strokes.

Accidents and injuries

Too much alcohol can lead to balance problems, falls, hip or arm fractures and other injuries.

As we age, our reactions can slow down and our sense of balance and co-ordination are not as good as when we were younger. Older people also have thinner bones than younger people, so their bones break more easily.

Alcohol can also cause us to be careless with regard to basic safety habits such as locking doors or turning off cookers.

Alcohol and dementia

Drinking above low-risk guidelines increases your risk of developing dementia such as Alzheimer's disease and vascular dementia.

Alcohol and weight loss

People who drink heavily may not eat regularly due to loss of appetite and self neglect. They may therefore lose weight rapidly, which may be noticed by family or care staff.

Alcohol and sleep

The 'night cap' might help you to fall asleep more quickly, but sleep after drinking is often bad quality sleep. This can leave you feeling drowsy and with poor concentration the next day.

Alcohol and medicine

As we get older, we often need to take prescription and over-the-counter medicines. Mixing alcohol with some medicines can stop them working properly or cause more damage to your health, for example antidepressants, anxiolytics or steroids.

Check with your doctor, pharmacist or other healthcare professional if it's safe for you to drink alcohol with the medicines you are taking.

Alcohol and your mental health

Less alcohol is better for your mood and mental health.

Sometimes we drink alcohol to relieve feelings of stress, or to cope with worry or tough times. However, turning to alcohol to cope when times are tough can bring more problems.

At first, alcohol can seem to lessen symptoms of low mood and anxiety, but alcohol is a depressant and continued drinking will cause these feelings to worsen.

Problem drinking

It is possible for people to develop problems with alcohol late in life. Often, people begin to drink more than they used to due to pain or disability, retirement, because they have problems sleeping or have lost a spouse.



Drinking guidelines

Drinking within low-risk guidelines can reduce your risk of harm from alcohol. There is no 'safe' or 'healthy' amount of alcohol, but the less you drink, the lower the risk to your health.

For healthy adults aged 18-65, the low-risk guidelines are currently:

Men: 17 standard drinks

(170 grams of pure alcohol) or less a week

Women: 11 standard drinks

(110 grams of pure alcohol) or less a week

If you are older than 65, you may need to drink less to stay within the low-risk range.

1 Standard Drink contains **10g of pure alcohol**

1 Standard Drink

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Half pint of
beer / stout / ale



Single measure
of spirits



Small glass
of wine

Space and pace your drinking

Try to have at least two to three alcohol free days a week and spread your drinks over the week. Drinking more than six standard drinks at a time significantly increases the risks to your health and wellbeing. Spacing and pacing your drinking will also help you to avoid building tolerance to alcohol and forming a habit.

But wine is okay, right?

Lots of people make the mistake of thinking that wine is somehow better for you than other types of alcohol. The reality is that your body can't tell the difference between different types of alcohol such as wine, beer or spirits. It's how much alcohol you drink that matters, not what you drink.

Tips to drink less

- Try to keep within the low-risk weekly limits.
- If drinking at home, use a drinks measure to calculate how much you are pouring.
- Buy smaller wine glasses and keep track of how much you're drinking. A big wine glass can hold two standard drinks or more.
- Keep track of what you're drinking with a drinks diary – note how much you drink, when, and how you felt afterwards.
- Try alternating alcoholic and non-alcoholic drinks, such as water.
- Choose a lower strength drink, whether it is a wine or a beer.
- Do something else. Try a fun, non-alcohol based activity with friends.



When it's not safe to drink at all

- You regularly lose control of your drinking or you find that once you start drinking you cannot stop.
- You are experiencing certain alcohol related physical or mental health problems.
- If you are taking medications and are unsure if it's safe to drink alcohol, check with your doctor or healthcare professional.





Visit **askaboutalcohol.ie** to assess your drinking, get tips on cutting down and find details of support services.

Contact the HSE Alcohol and Drugs Helpline for information and support services.

Call **1800 459 459**

from Monday to Friday 9.30am to 5.30pm

or email **helpline@hse.ie**

If you are concerned about your drinking, talk to a health professional such as an addiction counsellor or your GP.

For information on other drugs visit **drugs.ie**