



HOLY FAMILY
PARISH

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Alcohol Promotes Cancer Risk

How does alcohol work inside your body to raise your risk for cancer? More pitfalls of drinking alcohol are being revealed by researchers, many of whom now say that consuming any amount of alcohol poses risk for breast cancer. It may seem festive to sip a cocktail or glass of wine now and then, but it's important to remember that AIRC's expert report strongly links alcohol consumption to an increased risk for several cancers: mouth, pharynx, larynx, esophagus, colorectal, liver, and breast. The largest studies to date show that any level of alcohol will increase a woman's risk of developing breast cancer, both before and after menopause.

Different Effects for Men and Women

Alcohol affects men and women differently, not only with cancer, but in other ways as well. Alcohol stays in a woman's bloodstream longer than a man's. The slower metabolism of women creates alcohol-related health problems faster in women than in men who drink the same amount.

Breast Cancer Risk and Alcohol

Recent results from a study that monitored about 75,000 nurses in 1976 suggest that even moderate levels of alcohol increase the amount of estrogen circulating in the blood. (Estrogen is a contributing factor in several forms of breast cancer.) This effect is seen in both premenopausal women and postmenopausal women (both taking and not taking hormone replacement therapy.) Dr. Wendy Chen of Harvard Medical School and co-author of the study says, "The effects of drinking alcohol are cumulative for a woman's lifetime, so cutting back on alcohol at any age will help decrease the risk of developing breast cancer."

More Downsides to Alcohol

Beyond estrogen levels, other mechanisms may be at play. While alcohol has not been officially classified as a carcinogen, it yields the cancer-causing substance acetaldehyde when we metabolize it. It may also help carcinogens to cross more easily through cell membranes and enter the cell interior where genetic material is located, influence the body's inflammation response and increase the number of potentially damaging free radical molecules, negatively affect the balance of prostaglandins, (substances that control the growth of cells), and reduce amounts of folate (a B vitamin) our digestive tract absorbs from foods to maintain healthy DNA in our genes.

Alcoholic drinks also add calories that can contribute to overweight, a separate risk factor for cancer. Remember: alcohol has almost as many calories per gram as fat does.

To reduce your cancer risk as much as possible, AIRC continues recommend not drinking alcohol at all. If you do drink alcohol, limit your consumption to one standard drink per day for women, and two standard-size drinks daily for men. Although some findings show that drinking alcohol in moderation may lower risk of heart disease, it's important to talk with your health care provider to weigh this possible protection against the increased risk of cancer.

What is a Drink?

12 fluid ounces of normal strength (3-5% alcohol content) beer, 1.5 ounces of 80-proof liquor, such as vodka or whiskey, 1 fluid ounce of 100-proof liquor; such as bourbon or vodka, 5 fluid ounces (8-14% alcohol content) of wine, and 12 fluid ounces (4% alcohol content) of alcoholic lemonade or other carbonated drink.

The brochure, The Facts about Alcohol, gives handy tips on recommended alcohol limit, standard drink sizes and offers ways to drink less alcohol. Free copies may be obtained from: American Institute for Cancer Research Fall 2012, Issue 117 @ <http://www.aicr.org/>. Information for this article was from American Institute for Cancer Research Newsletter on Diet, Weight, Physical Activity and Cancer, Fall 2012 Issue 117.

May you all have a Merry Christmas and Happy New Year from Your Parish Nurse.

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