

Women and alcohol



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In Ireland, most of the messages we get about alcohol emphasise the positive side – relaxing and having fun with friends. We don't talk often about the negatives, but the risks are real.

The more you drink, the greater your risk of alcohol-related harm.

Women are at higher risk than men

If you drink, you have a higher risk of health problems from alcohol than a man and the problems are likely to start earlier. This is because women's bodies absorb alcohol faster than men's. If you drink the same amount as a man, the alcohol in your blood will be more concentrated because you have less water in your body to dilute the alcohol than a man does. Women also have a higher proportion of body fat, which does not absorb alcohol as well as muscle. They also have fewer of the enzymes that break down alcohol.

Alcohol and your health

Alcohol and cancer

Alcohol increases your risk of several types of cancers such as mouth, throat and liver cancer. Alcohol is responsible for 1 in 8 breast cancers in Ireland.

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.

Every year around 900 people in Ireland are diagnosed with alcohol-related cancers and around 500 people die from these diseases. 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. It can also increase your blood pressure and lead to strokes.

Alcohol and mental health

Less alcohol is better for your mood and mental health.

Many people see alcohol as a way to relax and de-stress. However, alcohol can make it harder to cope with day-to-day stresses.

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 continued drinking will cause these feelings to worsen.

Your tolerance for alcohol increases the more you drink, so if you drink to cope, over time you may also need to drink more to get the same level of temporary relief. This increases your chances of becoming dependent on alcohol.

Alcohol and personal safety

Alcohol lowers inhibitions, makes us more impulsive and causes us to do things we may not do if we were sober. Being drunk increases our chances of being in an accident. It also increases our vulnerability to being exploited by others.

Alcohol and weight gain

If you drink alcohol, you are drinking 'empty calories'. In turn, you may gain weight but not nourish your body. We often don't think about the calories in our alcoholic drinks the way we do with food, but a glass of wine or a pint of beer can contain the same amount of calories as a bar of chocolate. To make things worse, we often crave fast food and unhealthy snacks when we have been drinking.

Alcohol and pregnancy

It is best for your baby if you don't drink alcohol while you are pregnant or planning to get pregnant. When you drink alcohol, so does your unborn child. During pregnancy alcohol passes from your bloodstream through the placenta into the baby's bloodstream, where it can affect your baby's development. Exposure to alcohol in the womb can affect the brain and/or body of the developing fetus.

Coping with someone else's drinking

If someone in your immediate family is a heavy drinker, it can leave you – and your children – unhappy, angry, scared, confused, guilty and unable to cope. If the person is violent towards you, talk to someone you trust and always consider your own and your children's safety. You can get help and support by contacting **Women's Aid** 24 hour helpline on **1800 341 900**.

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:

Women: 11 standard drinks

(110 grams of pure alcohol) or less a week

Men: 17 standard drinks

(170 grams of pure alcohol) or less a week

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.

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 believe 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.

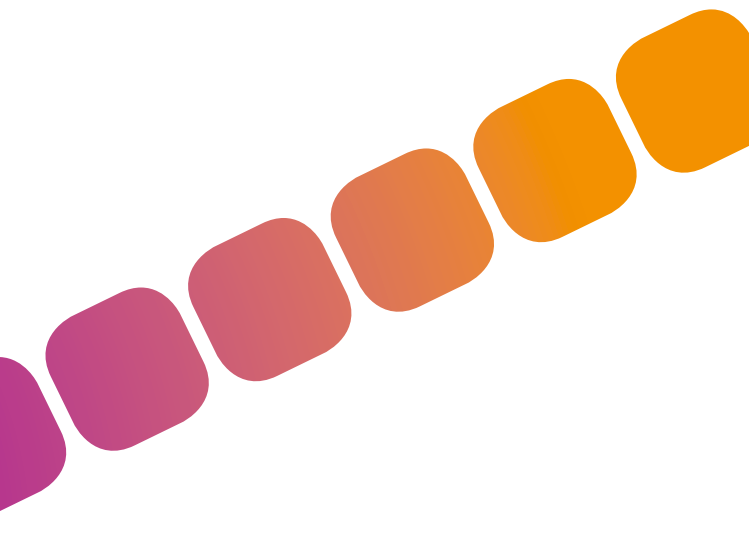
Tips to drink less

- 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. 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.
- Don't get involved in rounds. This means you can drink at your own pace and stay more in control when you're out.
- 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 are pregnant, considering becoming pregnant or are breastfeeding.
- 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.
- You are under the age of 18.
- If you are unsure if it's safe to drink alcohol, check with your doctor or health care 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 9.30pm 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**