

# alcohol and cancer

Alcohol is associated with an increased risk of getting cancer overall. In terms of specific cancers:

- There is strong, clear evidence that alcohol has a definite role in causing cancers of the lips, mouth, larynx and oesophagus, and some evidence of a possible role in causing liver cancer.
- There is, also, enough evidence to suggest that it may play a role in increasing the risk of getting a number of other types of cancer, particularly of breast and bowel cancers.

## There is evidence

- of a clear relationship between increased levels of drinking and an increased risk of cancer.
- that the risk of cancers begins with the consumption of even small amounts of alcohol; and
- that even one drink per day can significantly increase the risk of some types of cancer.

**There is no evidence that alcohol at any level has any protective effect against any types of cancer.**

## ALCOHOL CONSUMPTION AND CANCER

People who drink regularly at risky or high risk levels are at increased risk, over the longer term, of getting various cancers.

There is also some evidence of the risk of various cancers at low levels of drinking, especially in the case of the mouth and other parts of the upper digestive system, and of breast cancer.

## ALCOHOL AS A CAUSE OF CANCERS OF THE LIPS, MOUTH, THROAT, LARYNX AND OESOPHAGUS

There is very firm evidence that alcohol has a role in causing the cancers of the upper digestive system, in each of the areas from the lips to the oesophagus. This is most probably due to the alcohol damaging or destroying the cells of these areas by direct contact with them. Other factors can affect the risk of these cancers, for example:

- The risk is dramatically increased in heavy drinkers who also smoke.

## ALCOHOL AND LIVER CANCER

An association between liver cancer and alcohol is well established, and there is sufficient evidence for some researchers to conclude that this may be a causal association, that is, that alcohol may cause liver cancer.



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## ALCOHOL AND CANCERS OF THE STOMACH AND PANCREAS

There is clear evidence that alcohol causes inflammation in the stomach (as gastritis) and the pancreas (as pancreatitis), but the link between these parts of the body and cancer – while probable – is less well documented and understood.

## BOWEL CANCER

There is a clear association between the amount of alcohol that is drunk and the risk of bowel cancer (cancer of the colon or rectum), and recent studies suggest that alcohol may act as an important risk factor when combined with smoking, and with poor diet.

## BREAST CANCER

There is some evidence suggesting that women may be at increased risk of this type of cancer from even low-to-moderate amounts of alcohol, and that the strongest link with alcohol use may be in older women.

## THE NEED FOR MORE RESEARCH

The evidence suggests that every extra drink increases the risk of cancer. However, further research about the association between cancer and alcohol is required to understand more about:

- the role of alcohol;
- whether alcohol works by initiating or promoting this disease;
- how alcohol affects specific types of cancer; and
- whether other risk factors in combination with alcohol may have a role.

## PRINCIPAL SOURCE

National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) (2001). Australian Alcohol Guide lines: Health Risks and Benefits. NHMRC, Canberra.

## OTHER SOURCES

Alcohol in Australia: Issues and Strategies. (2001) Commonwealth Department of Health and Aged Care, Canberra.

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