

Alcohol and breast cancer risk

How much does drinking alcohol affect your risk?

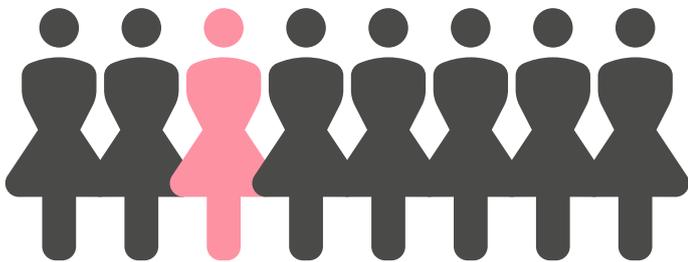
Quick facts

- Regularly drinking alcohol (even one drink a day) increases your risk of developing breast cancer
- The more you drink, the greater your risk
- Limit the amount of alcohol you regularly drink throughout your life to reduce your risk of breast cancer



How likely am I to get breast cancer?

Breast cancer is the most common cancer in the UK. Overall, one in eight women develops the disease in their lifetime, but not everyone's risk is the same.



Some people will have a higher or lower risk than others. Our chances of developing breast cancer depend on a combination of our genes and bodies, lifestyle and life choices and surrounding environment.

You cannot change some things that affect your risk, such as getting older. However there are other things you can change.

Limiting the amount of alcohol you drink throughout your life is one of the ways you can reduce your risk of getting breast cancer.

Will drinking alcohol increase my risk?

Many research studies show that regularly drinking alcohol is associated with a higher risk of developing breast cancer. Even drinking only one drink a day can increase your risk.

The more alcohol you drink, the higher your chance of developing breast cancer at some point in your life.

Why does drinking alcohol increase my risk?

We are still not entirely sure how alcohol increases the risk of breast cancer. It might alter the levels of hormones in your body, including the female sex hormone oestrogen. Oestrogen plays useful roles in the body, but can increase the growth of some breast cancers.

A few research studies have found that oestrogen levels are higher in women who drink more alcohol; this might increase the chance of breast cancer starting to develop. There might be other ways that alcohol increases the risk of breast cancer. However these are not yet clear from research studies.

How much alcohol is in my drink?

The amount of alcohol in a drink can be measured in units. Some drinks have more alcohol in them than others:

	Units
 Single measure of spirits	1
 An alcopop	1.5
 Double spirit measure/ Pint of lower strength lager, bitter or cider/ 175ml glass of wine (standard/medium measure)	2
 Pint of higher strength lager, bitter or cider/ 250ml glass of wine (large measure)	3



How much will drinking alcohol increase my risk?

Your risk of breast cancer will depend on how much alcohol you tend to drink each day. The more you drink, the more likely you are to develop breast cancer in your lifetime.

We can show this in the chart on the next page. This shows how many women out of 100 will develop breast cancer in their lifetime, depending on how much they drink.

For example:

- In a group of 100 women who do not drink, about 11 will probably develop breast cancer in their lifetime.
- In contrast, in a group of 100 women who drink two units of alcohol a day (that's a standard glass of wine), about 14 will develop breast cancer in their lifetime.
- Therefore, drinking two units a day causes about three extra women out of every 100 to develop breast cancer.

Breast cancer risk increases with the number of units of alcohol drunk per day



Remember that a single alcoholic drink often has more than one unit of alcohol in it.

Does my choice of drink affect my risk?

Current evidence suggests that all types of alcoholic drink are associated with an increased risk of breast cancer. While the type of alcohol does not matter, the size, alcohol content and number of drinks you have will affect your risk of breast cancer.

What about binge drinking?

Binge drinking means having multiple drinks (for women, about six or more units) in a few hours. It's not yet known whether binge drinking on just one or two days of the week leads to a higher risk of breast cancer than drinking the equivalent amount spread evenly throughout the week.

Will avoiding alcohol prevent me getting breast cancer?

Although drinking less alcohol lowers your risk of breast cancer, even women who do not drink alcohol at all are still at risk of getting breast cancer (see chart).

It is not possible to predict exactly who will get breast cancer. Although we know that drinking alcohol increases risk, other factors also play a part in why some women develop the disease and others don't.

What else should I consider?

As well as increasing breast cancer risk, drinking alcohol can lead to an increased risk of:

- liver problems
- reduced fertility
- high blood pressure
- various other cancers
- heart attack

National health guidelines recommend that women drink no more than two to three units of alcohol per day (that's one glass of wine or pint of beer).

Breast Cancer Now Alcohol and breast cancer risk

breastcancernow.org

We recommend you consider the risks and benefits of drinking alcohol. Unlike some other breast cancer risk factors, alcohol consumption is something you can change. The important message is to be aware of how many units of alcohol you are consuming and try to limit the amount you drink.

If you are drinking at home, you may wish to measure out your drinks. And if you drink alcohol to relax, you could try some other ways to unwind – such as gentle exercise or taking a bath.

If you are worried about your alcohol consumption or would like advice and support about cutting down your drinking, visit your GP. Information and advice is also available from NHS Choices (www.nhs.uk).

For more ways to reduce your risk see breastcancernow.org or call Freephone 0333 20 70 300

About Breast Cancer Now

We're Breast Cancer Now, the UK's largest breast cancer charity – and we're dedicated to funding research into this devastating disease. We're determined to stop women dying of breast cancer by 2050. But we'll only reach that point by working in a new, more open and collaborative way. We're bringing together all those affected by the disease to fund research, share knowledge and find answers. To improve the way we prevent, detect, treat and stop the disease. So we can move from a time when people still fear breast cancer to a generation where everybody lives. Join us at breastcancernow.org

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We welcome feedback. Please email comments to info@breastcancernow.org or call 0333 20 70 300.

This leaflet is based on up-to-date research evidence and aims to give the best information available. All information was reviewed by appropriate experts and members of the public. We advise readers with concerns about breast cancer to discuss them with a health professional.

If you would like more information about the sources of evidence on which this publication is based, please contact info@breastcancernow.org or call 0333 20 70 300.

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