



Health Risks of Alcohol Abuse

Medical Consequences of Alcohol Abuse

From the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#)

About 178,000 people die from excessive alcohol use each year in the United States.¹ Excessive alcohol use is the 3rd leading lifestyle-related cause of death for the nation.² Additionally, excessive alcohol use is responsible for 1.2 million years of potential life lost (YPLL) annually, or an average of about 30 years of potential life lost for each death. In the single year 2005, there were more than 1.6 million hospitalizations³ and more than 4 million emergency room visits⁴ for alcohol-related conditions.

The Standard Measure of Alcohol

In the United States, a standard drink is any drink that contains 0.6 ounces (13.7 grams or 1.2 tablespoons) of pure alcohol. Generally, this amount of pure alcohol is found in:

- 12-ounces of regular beer or wine cooler.
- 8-ounces of malt liquor.
- 5-ounces of wine.
- 1.5-ounces of 80-proof distilled spirits or liquor (e.g., gin, rum, vodka, whiskey).

Definitions of Patterns of Drinking Alcohol

- Binge drinking
 - For women, 4 or more drinks during a single occasion.
 - For men, 5 or more drinks during a single occasion.
- Heavy drinking
 - For women, more than 1 drink per day on average.
 - For men, more than 2 drinks per day on average.

Excessive drinking includes heavy drinking, binge drinking or both. Most people

who binge drink are not alcoholics or alcohol dependent.⁵

According to the Dietary Guidelines for Americans, if you drink alcoholic beverages, do so in moderation, which is defined as no more than 1 drink per day for women and no more than 2 drinks per day for men.⁶ However, there are some persons who should not drink any alcohol, including those who are

- Pregnant or trying to become pregnant.
- Taking prescriptions or over-the-counter medications that may cause harmful reactions when mixed with alcohol.
- Younger than age 21.



ALAMO COLLEGES DISTRICT Northwest Vista College

- Recovering from alcoholism or are unable to control the amount they drink.
- Suffering from a medical condition that may be worsened by alcohol.
- Driving, planning to drive, or participating in other activities requiring skill, coordination, and alertness.

Immediate Health Risks

Excessive alcohol use has immediate effects that increase the risk of many harmful health conditions. These immediate effects are most often the result of binge drinking and include the following:

- Unintentional injuries, including traffic injuries, falls, drownings, burns, and unintentional firearm injuries.⁷ —
- Violence, including intimate partner violence and child maltreatment. About 35% of victims report that offenders are under the influence of alcohol.⁸ Alcohol use is also associated with 2 out of 3 incidents of intimate partner violence.⁸ Studies have also shown that alcohol is a leading factor in child maltreatment and neglect cases, and is the most frequent substance abused among these parents.⁹ —
- Risky sexual behaviors, including unprotected sex, sex with multiple partners, and increased risk of sexual assault. These behaviors can result in unintended pregnancy or sexually transmitted diseases.^{10, 11} — —
- Miscarriage and stillbirth among pregnant women, and a combination of physical and mental birth defects among children that last throughout life.^{12, 13} — —
- Alcohol poisoning, a medical emergency that results from high blood alcohol levels that suppress the central nervous system and can cause loss of consciousness, low blood pressure and body temperature, coma, respiratory depression, or death.¹⁴ —

Long-Term Health Risks

Over time, excessive alcohol use can lead to the development of chronic diseases, neurological impairments and social problems. These include but are not limited to:

- Neurological problems, including dementia, stroke and neuropathy.^{15, 16} — —
- Cardiovascular problems, including myocardial infarction, cardiomyopathy, atrial fibrillation and hypertension.¹⁷ —
- Psychiatric problems, including depression, anxiety, and suicide.¹⁸ —
- Social problems, including unemployment, lost productivity, and family problems.^{19, 20} — —
- Cancer of the mouth, throat, esophagus, liver, colon, and breast.²¹ In general, the risk of cancer increases with increasing amounts of alcohol.
- Liver diseases, including-
 - Alcoholic hepatitis.
 - Cirrhosis, which is among the 15 leading causes of all deaths in the United States.²² —
 - Among persons with Hepatitis C virus, worsening of liver function and interference with medications used to treat this condition.²³ —
 - Other gastrointestinal problems, including pancreatitis and gastritis.^{24, 25} — —

References

1. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). *Alcohol-Related Disease Impact (ARDI)*. Atlanta, GA: CDC. Available at https://nccd.cdc.gov/DPH_ARDI/Default/Default.aspx Accessed January 20, 2026.
2. Mokdad AH, Marks JS, Stroup DF, Gerberding JL. [Actual causes of death in the United States, 2000](#). *JAMA* 2004;291(10):1238–1245.



3. Chen CM, Yi H. *Trends in Alcohol-Related Morbidity Among Short-Stay Community Hospital Discharges, United States, 1979–2005*. Bethesda, MD: National Institutes of Health, National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism. NIAAA Surveillance Report #80, 2007.
4. McCaig LF, Burt CW. [National Hospital Ambulatory Medical Care Survey: 2003 emergency department summary \[PDF–875K\]](#). Advance data from vital and health statistics; No 358. Hyattsville, Maryland: National Center for Health Statistics. 2005.
5. Dawson DA, Grant BF, LI T-K. [Quantifying the risks associated with exceeding recommended drinking limits](#). *Alcohol Clin Exp Res* 2005;29:902–908.
6. United States Department of Agriculture and United States Department of Health and Human Services. In: *Dietary Guidelines for Americans*. Chapter 9—Alcoholic Beverages. Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office; 2005, p. 43–46. Available at <http://www.health.gov/DIETARYGUIDELINES/dga2005/document/html/chapter9.htm>. Accessed March 28, 2008.
7. Smith GS, Branäs CC, Miller TR. [Fatal nontraffic injuries involving alcohol: a metaanalysis](#). *Ann of Emer Med* 1999;33(6):659–668.
8. Greenfield LA. [Alcohol and Crime: An Analysis of National Data on the Prevalence of Alcohol Involvement in Crime](#). Report prepared for the Assistant Attorney General's National Symposium on Alcohol Abuse and Crime. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, 1998.
9. The National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University, 1999. No safe haven: children of substance-abusing parents. Available at http://www.casacolumbia.org/templates/publications_reports.aspx. Accessed April 1, 2010.
10. Naimi TS, Lipscomb LE, Brewer RD, Colley BG. [Binge drinking in the preconception period and the risk of unintended pregnancy: Implications for women and their children](#). *Pediatrics* 2003;111(5):1136–1141.
11. Wechsler H, Davenport A, Dowdall G, Moeykens B, Castillo S. [Health and behavioral consequences of binge drinking in college](#). *JAMA* 1994;272(21):1672–1677.
12. Kesmodel U, Wisborg K, Olsen SF, Henriksen TB, Sechler NJ. [Moderate alcohol intake in pregnancy and the risk of spontaneous abortion](#). *Alcohol & Alcoholism* 2002;37(1):87–92.
13. American Academy of Pediatrics, Committee on Substance Abuse and Committee on Children with Disabilities. 2000. [Fetal alcohol syndrome and alcohol-related neurodevelopmental disorders](#). *Pediatrics* 2000;106:358–361.
14. Sanap M, Chapman MJ. [Severe ethanol poisoning: a case report and brief review](#). *Crit Care Resusc* 2003;5(2):106–108.
15. Corrao G, Rubbiati L, Zambon A, Arico S. [Alcohol-attributable and alcohol-preventable mortality in Italy. A balance in 1983 and 1996](#). *European J of Public Health* 2002;12:214–223.
16. Corrao G, Bagnardi V, Zambon A, La Vecchia C. [A meta-analysis of alcohol consumption and the risk of 15 diseases](#). *Prev Med* 2004;38:613–619.
17. Rehm J, Gmel G, Sepos CT, Trevisan M. [Alcohol-related morbidity and mortality](#). *Alcohol Research and Health* 2003;27(1):39–51.
18. Castaneda R, Sussman N, Westreich L, Levy R, O'Malley M. [A review of the effects of moderate alcohol intake on the treatment of anxiety and mood disorders](#). *J Clin Psychiatry* 1996;57(5):207–212.
19. Booth BM, Feng W. [The impact of drinking and drinking consequences on short-term employment outcomes in at-risk drinkers in six southern states](#). *J Behavioral Health Services and Research* 2002;29(2):157–166.
20. Leonard KE, Rothbard JC. [Alcohol and the marriage effect](#). *J Stud Alcohol Suppl* 1999;13:139–146.
21. Baan R, Straif K, Grosse Y, Secretan B, et al. on behalf of the WHO International Agency for Research on Cancer Monograph Working Group. Carcinogenicity of alcoholic beverages. *Lancet Oncol*. 2007;8:292–293.
22. Heron MP. Deaths: Leading causes for 2004. *National vital statistics reports*; vol 56 no 5. Hyattsville, MD: National Center for Health Statistics. 2007. Available at http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/nvsr/nvsr56/nvsr56_05.pdf [PDF–3.16MB]. Accessed March 28, 2008.



ALAMO COLLEGES DISTRICT Northwest Vista College

23. Schiff ER. [Hepatitis C and alcohol](#). *Hepatology* 1997;26 (Suppl 1): 39S–42S.
24. Leshner SDH, Lee YTM. [Acute pancreatitis in a military hospital](#). *Military Med* 1989;154(11):559–564.
25. Kelly JP, Kaufman DW, Koff RS, Laszlo A, Wilholm BE, Shapiro S. [Alcohol consumption and the risk of major upper gastrointestinal bleeding](#). *Am J Gastroenterol* 1995;90(7):1058

Note Regarding Off-Site Links:

Links to non-Alamo Colleges District organizations are provided solely as a service to our users. These links do not constitute an endorsement of these organizations or their programs by the Alamo Colleges District, and none should be inferred. The Alamo Colleges District is not responsible for the content found at these links.

Special Acknowledgement

The previous sections provide further information, research, and resources regarding district policy, state law, and alcohol and substance abuse. The format and research were developed and conducted by the Austin Community College District. Relevant district-specific information, web-links, and references to local resources have been modified accordingly to Northwest Vista College, the Alamo College District, and its service area. Special thanks to the Austin Community College District for sharing their guidance and knowledge.