

Alcohol: Rethink Your Drink

Depending on factors such as your age, health status, and how much you drink, alcohol can be either harmful or beneficial. The graph at right shows results of a survey of alcohol use and safety done by the National Institutes of Health. It shows that 3 in 10 American adults drink at heavy or at-risk levels.





How should you think about your drinking? Do your habits place you at low or increased risk for problems? Do you need to make changes? This handout will help you reflect on your drinking patterns and understand the possible effects on your life and your health.

What's your risk level?

To assess a person's risk level, doctors look at how often a person drinks and how many drinks the person has in a day. **You can do the same simple assessment to gauge the safety of your own drinking.** The first step is knowing what a standard drink looks like.

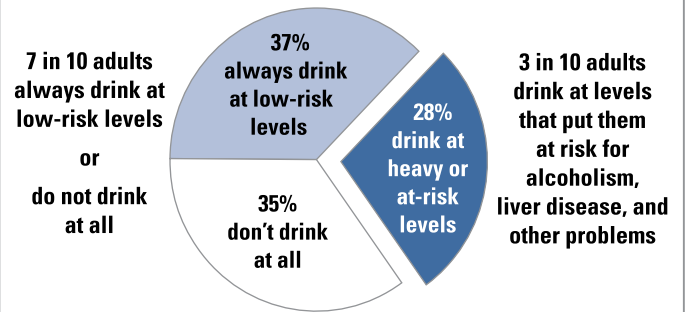
Step 1: Know what counts as "one drink"

Many people are surprised to learn what counts as a drink. Different types of drinks have different amounts of alcohol — so what counts as a drink varies. For example, though they are different sizes, **each of the drinks below counts as a single drink:**

12 fl oz of regular beer	=	8–9 fl oz of malt liquor <small>(shown in a 12 oz glass)</small>	=	5 fl oz of table wine <small>a standard bottle of wine contains 5 drinks</small>	=	1.5 fl oz shot of 80-proof spirits <small>("hard liquor"— whiskey, gin, rum, vodka, tequila, etc.) a fifth of liquor contains 17 shots — 17 drinks</small>
						
about 5% alcohol		about 7% alcohol		about 12% alcohol		about 40% alcohol

The percent of "pure" alcohol, expressed here as alcohol by volume (alc/vol), varies by beverage.

Alcohol use by adults in the United States*



*Although the minimum legal drinking age in the U.S. is 21, this survey included people aged 18 or older.

Step 2: See your pattern

Using the standard drink sizes listed in step 1, ask yourself these questions:

On any day in the past year, have you ever had

- for MEN: more than 4 drinks? yes no
- for WOMEN: more than 3 drinks? yes no

Think about your typical week:

- On average, how many days a week do you drink? ____ days (a)
 - On a typical drinking day, how many drinks do you have? ____ drinks (b)
- (multiply a x b) Your weekly average = ____

Beer (12 oz)	
Malt Liquor (8–9 oz)	
Wine (5 oz)	
Hard Liquor (1.5 oz)	

Step 3: Check your risk level

Depending on your habits, your drinking puts you either at **low risk** for problems, or at **increased risk**. The table below shows how your doctor assigns these risk levels.

What's your risk level?

You are at **AT LOW RISK** if you are under both the daily limit and the weekly limit for your drinking.

	men	women	
LOW RISK	on any single day	no more than 4 drinks in a day	no more than 3 drinks in a day
		AND	AND
	per week	no more than 14 drinks per week	no more than 7 drinks per week

You are **AT INCREASED RISK** if you drink more than the daily or weekly limit.

	men	women	
INCREASED RISK	on any single day	more than 4 drinks in a day	more than 3 drinks in a day
		OR	OR
	per week	more than 14 drinks per week	more than 7 drinks per week

Of course, these two broad categories don't tell the whole story of about a person's risk from alcohol. As you think about your own risk level, keep the following in mind:

- Not all drinking is harmful. Drinking below the daily and weekly limits might even be good for your heart. *However...*
- "Low-risk" doesn't mean "no risk." Even if you stay within the daily and weekly limits, you can still have problems if you drink too fast, have a health problem, or are over age 65. *Also...*
- A person at "increased risk" may already be in trouble. For example, if you drink more than both the daily and weekly limit, you're a heavy drinker and have the highest chance of problems. *And finally...*
- Sometimes even a little is too much. If you're pregnant (or trying to become pregnant), planning to drive, or taking a medication that interacts with alcohol, you shouldn't drink at all.

What's the harm?

Drinking at an increased risk level raises your chance of the following problems:

- **Accidents, injuries, and aggression.** Drinking too much increases your chances of involvement in every type of injury and violence. Alcohol is a factor — for example — in about 60% of fatal burn injuries, drownings, and murders; 50% of severe trauma injuries and sexual assaults; and 40% of fatal crashes and falls.
- **Physical health problems.** Heavy drinkers have a greater chance of liver and heart disease, stroke, digestive problems, and some types of cancer. They're also more likely to have sexual dysfunction and premature aging.
- **Emotional and cognitive problems.** People who drink too much are more prone to anxiety and depression. They may have trouble sleeping and difficulty remembering things, and struggle at solving problems.
- **Problems with relationships, work, and studies.** Heavy drinking can interfere with your interactions and performance in every area of your life.
- **Birth defects.** Drinking during pregnancy can cause brain damage and deformities in the baby. Since scientists don't know whether any amount of alcohol is safe for a developing baby, women who are pregnant or trying to become pregnant should not drink.
- **Alcoholism and alcohol abuse.** Drinking at an increased risk level raises your chance developing an alcohol use disorder. About 8 million Americans have this disorder, meaning their alcohol use causes problems in their lives and health.

Need to make a change?

If your drinking habits put you at increased risk for problems, it may be time to think about a change. Talk to your doctor about your drinking. Consider cutting down or quitting. If you need ideas, encouragement, or resources, your doctor can help. Or, check out this site:

rethinkingdrinking.niaaa.nih.gov

Information from this site has informed the content in this handout. Go to the site above to learn more about drinking patterns and possible problems, and to find advice and resources to help you maintain healthy habits.

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