

Diabetes: Safety with Alcohol and Tobacco

We don't recommend that you drink alcohol or use tobacco products. However, we know that people often choose to try these things, even at great risk. If you do decide to use alcohol or tobacco, you can take action to stay safe. The first step is knowing how alcohol and tobacco can affect your diabetes.

Alcohol can cause low blood glucose (blood sugar)

Your body cannot adjust blood glucose (BG) while it tries to break down alcohol. This raises your risk of severe low blood glucose — called **hypoglycemia** [hi-po-gly-SEE-mee-uh]. You can remain at risk of hypoglycemia for many hours after you stop drinking.

How do I know if my blood glucose is too low?

Normal symptoms of low blood glucose like shaking, sweating, and a rapid heartbeat can be covered up by the effects of alcohol.

The ONLY way to know for sure is to test.

NOTE: Glucagon may not work as well when you're drinking, but should still be used for severe hypoglycemia.



How to stay safe if you choose to drink alcohol



Wear your medical ID.



Use the buddy system. Drink with a sober friend who is willing to stay with you and knows what to do if your BG gets low.



NEVER drink on an empty stomach. Eating a meal first will take the pressure off your liver. This is especially important if you are taking medicines called sulfonylureas or meglitinides. Check your prescriptions.



Be aware of how you're feeling. Medicines and insulin may act differently with alcohol. It's harder to notice symptoms of low blood glucose when you're drinking.



Drink slowly. Take sips, not gulps. Drink a glass of water with every drink of alcohol. Write down each drink of alcohol where you'll remember. Remember, it takes about 2 hours to break down 1 drink.



Stick to sugar-free mixers, such as club soda, sugar-free soda, or water. Avoid sugary sodas and liqueurs. They can raise your BG.



Check your BG. Alcohol and activities like dancing can make your BG spike or drop, so you need to keep track.



- **Check before your first drink, while drinking, and before you go to bed.**
 - Eat a carb meal while drinking.
 - Eat a snack before bed if your blood glucose is below 130.
- **Check during the night and when you wake up.**
 - Set alarms for the night and morning.
 - Ask someone to check on you in the morning.



Take your insulin, even if you're hung over, throwing up, and feeling too sick to eat. If you have concerns, call your diabetes team.

Have no more than 1 drink a day for a woman or 2 drinks a day for a man.

What is 1 drink? Each of these counts as 1 drink:

5 ounces of wine



12-ounce can or bottle of beer (light or regular)



1.5 ounces (one shot) of hard liquor (vodka, whiskey, gin, etc.)



4 ounces sherry or liqueur



TIP: Keep an alcohol-free drink on hand. If you don't want your friends to know it isn't alcohol, pour it in a glass or plastic cup.

Tobacco contains nicotine, which can make your diabetes worse

- **Nicotine can raise your A1C.** The nicotine in tobacco, vapes, e-cigarettes, or hookahs is unhealthy for everyone, but especially for people with diabetes. It can make it harder to control your diabetes, leading to **high A1Cs**. It can increase your **insulin resistance**, which means that your body needs more and more insulin to respond like it should.
- **Nicotine increases your risk for complications.** Nicotine can also increase your risk for other diabetes complications, including:
 - **Heart and kidney disease.**
 - **Poor blood flow in your legs and feet.** This can lead to infections, ulcers, and possible removal of a body part by surgery, such as toes or feet (amputation).
 - **Eye disease** that can cause blindness (called retinopathy).
 - **Damaged nerves to the arms and legs** that causes numbness, pain, weakness, and poor coordination (called peripheral neuropathy).

How to stay safe: QUIT

The best thing you can do for your health is to quit using tobacco and other products with nicotine. Ask your healthcare provider for a copy of Intermountain's booklet, Quitting Tobacco: Your Journey to Freedom. It can help you quit for good and connect you with support groups and classes, so you aren't going it alone.



Questions for my doctor
