

Alcohol & Cancer

DOWN TO EARTH
ADVICE, TIPS &
SUGGESTIONS

If you fancy a tipple, but have cancer or are worried that alcohol may cause cancer, this booklet provides advice, tips and suggestions on how to cut down or make some simple changes to keep life sociable, but healthier

LET'S DIVE IN.



DOES ALCOHOL CAUSE CANCER?

That's a big question without a simple answer.

Alcohol has been shown to increase the risk of seven different cancers. [This article](#) from the World Cancer Research Fund, explains what those are.

Scientists are still trying to figure out how the two are linked but research has shown that we could prevent about 1 in 5 breast cancer cases – 11,000 cases a year – by not drinking alcohol. The recommended advice is to simply not have any alcohol to reduce the risk of getting cancer and to help you recover faster from cancer.

[Read this](#) for advice from the World Cancer Research Fund and [this](#) for advice from Cancer Research UK.

The easy answer is to say: Don't drink any alcohol. But for many people, having a drink is a sociable thing to do. This booklet will share some tips on how to reduce your alcohol intake while still letting you live life to the full.



CAN YOU DRINK ALCOHOL IF YOU HAVE CANCER?

This advice is for people who want to avoid the risk of cancer or for people in recovery. If you're currently going through cancer treatment, see the next section.

Almost every month a new study comes out with conflicting advice. For example, a report published in the Lancet in April 2018 said that drinking five to 10 alcoholic drinks a week was likely to shorten a person's life by up to six months. Those who have 18 drinks or more lose up to five years of life. Yet other studies suggest that drinking red wine is good for the heart and another study said that drinking three to four times a week led to a lower risk of type 2 diabetes.

It can be hard to know what to believe. It is safe to assume however, that alcohol carries more health risks than health benefits.

Government advice in the UK is to have no more than 14 units of alcohol a week (for men and women). A unit is often a lot less than you might realise. Here's a handy guide

on what constitutes a unit <https://www.drinkaware.co.uk> - 14 units is typically six 175ml glasses of wine, or six pints of beer.

[This handy sheet](#) from the World Cancer Research Fund spells it out clearly too.

My advice?

If you want to drink alcohol, halve the government guidelines and aim for 7 units of alcohol per week. That way you're halving the recommended maximum but you're not completely depriving yourself if you enjoy alcohol socially.

Try to spread the units over the week and aim to have two alcohol-free days. You will feel so much better for it and you'll be boosting your long-term health.

CAN YOU HAVE ALCOHOL DURING CHEMO?



As a general rule, when you have cancer, particularly if you are undergoing chemotherapy, it's more important than ever to feed your body with good things that will give it the best chance of recovery. So the short answer should be no. But for many people, this is the exact time when they may want a drink to relax and carry on with life as normal as possible.

People respond to chemotherapy differently depending on the drugs they're given and their reaction to it. So there is no one size fits all answer but here are some things to consider:

- Talk to your doctor as alcohol may interact with some chemotherapy drugs like Procarbazine and lomustine.
- Bear in mind that any treatment side effects you have like fatigue, dry or sore mouth are likely to feel worse if you have alcohol.
- You may not feel like drinking anyway if you are suffering from nausea, have an upset stomach or have had taste changes.

But if you are feeling okay and feel like a drink, can you have one?

The typical advice is to avoid alcohol the day before and for one or two days after chemotherapy. If you do have a drink on other days, don't overdo it. Limit yourself to one or two drinks at most. More than that and you risk dehydration at the exact time you need to be well hydrated.

Here's a bit more information from [Cancer Research UK](#) on this topic.



TIPS TO DRINK LESS ALCOHOL

It's all well and good for the experts to say cut down on alcohol, but how do you do it? It can be tough when everyone around you is heading off to the pub or having a drink.

Here are some tips to help you cut down your alcohol consumption and limit the effects of it:

- Don't feel 'pressure' to drink if don't want to. Set your intentions before you go out...am I going to drink at this party tonight or not? There are brilliant low and no alcohol alternatives in this guide
- Avoid drinking on an empty stomach
- Drink plenty of water before and after drinking alcohol to remain well hydrated
- Opt for a smaller serving size of wine
- Sip your drinks slowly and alternate between alcoholic and non-alcoholic drinks
- Use a taller glass. It makes a longer drink
- Choose single measures of spirits rather than doubles
- Dilute alcoholic drinks. Add soda water to wine to make spritzers
- Have nuts/ seeds/ olives alongside your drink to balance blood sugar levels
- Avoid sugary mixers and juice mixers
- Drink to the bottom of the glass rather than keep topping up so you can keep track on how much you are drinking



LOW ALCOHOL DRINK IDEAS

Cutting down alcohol doesn't mean missing out on the fun. It's easy to create low alcohol drinks that still look like a normal drink and they taste great too.

Here are some low alcohol drink suggestions:

ROCK SHANDY

A popular drink in South Africa, add 4 to 5 drops of Angostura bitters to a glass of soda water + lime; or half soda water, half lemonade, slices of lemon, ice and a few drops of Angostura.

APEROL SPRITZ

A popular drink in Italy, it's made with Aperol, similar to Campari, just slightly sweeter. It also has half the alcohol content of Campari. Mix with soda water and an orange twist for an elegant and refreshing drink.

CAMPARI AND SODA WATER

At double the alcohol volume of Aperol, you need to use less. Just a splash with soda water makes a slightly more bitter drink for those who don't have a sweet tooth.

LOW ALCOHOL WINE SPRITZERS

There are excellent low or no alcohol wines on the market, which are great when mixed with soda water and topped with ice.

SHANDY MADE WITH A LOW ALCOHOL LAGER

Get a low alcohol lager and mix it with lemonade.



NON-ALCOHOLIC DRINK IDEAS

It really is possible to avoid alcohol altogether these days thanks to a booming range of alcohol-free drinks or simple swaps. Here are a few ideas to give you alcohol free days.

- Non-alcoholic pear or apple cider.
Try [Kopparberg](#)
- Alcohol-free wine.
Try [Eisberg](#)
- Alcohol-free 'spirits' (yes really!).
Try [Seedlip Drinks](#)
- Alcohol-free beer.
Try [Brewdog Nanny State](#)

There is a growing range of non-alcoholic drinks available on the market, which taste great and don't

make you feel like you're missing out. If you want to keep costs down and keep things simple and healthy, try these ideas:

- Virgin Mary - the goodness of tomato juice without the vodka
- Unsweetened coconut water (feel free to add a tropical umbrella)
- Vegetable juices
- Soda water and fresh lime, orange, grapefruit, mint, cucumber or berries

- Read [this article](#) for other non-alcoholic drink ideas.
- You could also encourage your friends to try one of the many non-alcoholic bars that are popping up. Here are six suggested by [Visit Britain](#).
- Or order some alcohol-free drinks from a company like this www.alcoholfree.co.uk



MOCKTAIL RECIPE BOOK

If you really love a drink but want to cut down or cut out alcohol, get yourself a mocktail recipe book for inspirational ideas. There are loads of them on the market, just be sure to choose one that isn't packed with sugary alternatives. Here's a list on [Amazon](#) to get you started.



LOW SUGAR ALCOHOLIC IDEAS

Excess sugar in a diet causes obesity. And obesity is the single biggest preventative cause of cancer, after smoking. Find out more about the role of sugar and cancer [here](#).

It's a good idea to find foods and drinks that reduce your sugar consumption. Many alcoholic drinks have high sugar content levels and the mixers that go with them are equally high. Here are some drink ideas to reduce your sugar intake:

- Vodka with sparkling water/soda water and fresh lemon, lime, orange or mint
- Tequila
- Gin with soda water and fresh cucumber
- Bloody Mary
- Red wine
- Champagne or dry sparkling wine
- Whisky and ice

The biggest sugar culprit? The mixers that go with alcohol. Here are some ways to fix that:

- Add ice to your drink
- Avoid sugary/ juice mixers ideally
- Soda or sparkling water is your best choice
- Try low sugar mixers like those from [Double Dutch drinks](#) or [Fever Tree](#)

Remember: even if you opt for a low sugar drink, you should still not exceed the recommended weekly alcohol allowance.



GET MOVING INSTEAD OF DRINKING

It's great to have some non-alcoholic or low-alcohol ideas, but for many of us, drinking is a habit. The best way to change a habit is to replace it with a new habit.

Instead of drinking, get moving instead. This doesn't have to be a gym session, particularly if you are undergoing treatment and don't have the energy to do anything. Simply go for a walk. The exercise will make you feel better, you'll feel less like drinking and you won't be tempted by others drinking around you.



I'm Meredy Birdi. I have been a cancer dietitian for nearly 20 years and have worked with literally thousands of people with cancer. I'm one of the few specialists with dual qualifications as a cancer dietitian and a nutritional therapist. This means I combine medical insight with a holistic point of view.

When you are diagnosed with cancer, are undergoing treatment, or are in recovery, you may feel like control of your life has been taken away. You may feel confused, scared, anxious, low, angry or just plain exhausted.

Taking back control and doing something positive helps alleviate many of these feelings. And that's where I come in. I help you take control of your diet – including alcohol - to make you feel better, both physically and emotionally.

There is a huge amount of conflicting dietary information out there and it can be hard to know what to believe or what is relevant to your particular situation.

As an expert in cancer nutrition, I work one-on-one with you to investigate your specific dietary needs and show

you how to put the latest dietary advice into practice in a way that works in your life. I can also advise you about nutritional supplements, should you need them.

This isn't just about giving you information though. I'm here to listen to you, support you and encourage you as you take back control.

If you or a family member has cancer and would benefit from nutritional advice, contact me to arrange a consultation.

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Additionally, you are welcome to follow my Cancer Dietitian Facebook page or join the [Nourish Club](#), my free Facebook group for people with cancer.