

Alcohol

and diabetes

In Australia, drinking alcohol is generally acceptable and for many people is a normal part of social events. However, for as long as alcohol has been used and enjoyed, some people have experienced problems associated with it.

Most people with diabetes can enjoy a moderate amount of alcohol. However it's best to discuss it first with your diabetes health care team.

How does alcohol affect the body?

Weight gain

As alcohol is high in kilojoules (29 kilojoules per gram versus 17 kilojoules per gram for protein and carbohydrates) too much can make you put on weight. Alcohol itself has little nutritional value and therefore the kilojoules found in alcohol are often called 'empty kilojoules'.

Too much can be dangerous

Drinking alcohol in large quantities can be extremely dangerous, both in the short and long term, affecting many different parts of the body including the brain, liver and pancreas. Too much alcohol can also increase the risk of developing heart disease and certain cancers such as breast, mouth and throat cancer.

On the positive side, a moderate amount of alcohol may protect many people against developing heart disease (refer second question in 'Frequently asked questions' on page 5).

How does alcohol affect a person with diabetes?

Too much alcohol can increase the risk of developing complications by putting on weight, increasing triglycerides (blood fats) and increasing blood pressure.

For people who are on insulin or taking certain diabetes tablets, alcohol can cause hypoglycaemia ('hypos').

Refer to page 4 for more information about alcohol-related 'hypos' and how to avoid them.

How much is 'too much'?

Research currently indicates that the alcohol recommendations for people with diabetes are no different to recommendations for the general population.

In general, the maximum amount of alcohol recommended for a person with diabetes is:

- 4 standard drinks a day if you are male.
- 2 standard drinks a day if you are female.

It is recommended that you have at least two alcohol-free days each week.

Some people may need to have less alcohol than these general recommendations. This may be due to their age, medication or their need to lose weight.

If you are overweight, have poor blood glucose control, high blood pressure, high triglycerides or other complications, your diabetes health care team may advise you to drink less or not to drink at all.

What is a standard drink?

A standard drink contains 10g of alcohol.

One standard drink is equal to:

- 285mL regular beer
- 100mL wine
- 425mL low alcohol beer (less than 3% alcohol)
- 60mL fortified wine
- 30 mL spirits

It is very easy to over-estimate a standard drink so it's important to be familiar with how much there actually is in a standard drink of each type of alcohol. You can do this by:

- Checking the amount of standard drinks in a bottle of wine or on the back of a bottle or can of beer.
- Measuring out a standard drink so you know what it looks like.
- Being aware that most wine glasses when full can hold almost two standard drinks.

What to choose?

It's best to limit very sweet drinks such as soft drink mixers, sweet liqueurs and pre-mixed alcoholic beverages. Choose wine, low-alcohol beers or spirits mixed with diet mixers.

Low-sugar beers offer no advantage to regular beer and in fact are often higher in alcohol which can be more of a problem for your diabetes management.

Are there any tips for drinking less?

Drinking too much alcohol can be harmful to your health both in the long and short-term.

Here's a few tips to reduce the amount you drink:

- 1 Drink some water or a diet soft drink before drinking any alcohol, so you're not thirsty.
- 2 Sip alcohol slowly.
- 3 Drink a non-alcoholic drink (eg: water or diet soft drink) between each alcoholic drink.
- 4 Dilute alcohol where possible such as making a beer shandy by mixing beer with low-joule lemonade or diluting wine with soda water.
- 5 Drink low-alcohol beer.

What about alcohol and ‘hypos’?

If you are taking insulin or certain diabetes tablets, you are at risk of alcohol-related hypoglycaemia (‘hypos’) which can be dangerous. This occurs because alcohol prevents the liver from making glucose for 12 to 36 hours after drinking it. This risk is particularly high when your glucose stores are low which is often during the night, in the morning, during and after exercise and when you haven’t eaten.

Ask your doctor or diabetes educator about any effects alcohol is likely to have on the tablets you are taking for your diabetes.

Why can alcohol-related ‘hypos’ be dangerous?

- 1 Studies have shown that alcohol may decrease your ability to recognise symptoms of a ‘hypo’ and therefore you may not treat it as quickly as you would normally.
- 2 People may think you’re drunk and therefore not offer to help.
- 3 The hypoglycaemia may be difficult to treat.

How can I avoid having alcohol-related ‘hypos’?

- Don’t drink alcohol on an empty stomach.
- Make sure you include carbohydrate foods in meals you eat before drinking alcohol eg: potato, rice, pasta and bread.
- Always eat some form of carbohydrate while drinking alcohol*.
- When drinking alcohol, particularly in the evening, always eat a carbohydrate snack before you go to bed and eat breakfast as soon as you wake up in the morning.
- Test your blood glucose level before bed.
- Avoid drinking excessive amounts of alcohol. More than two standard drinks for females and four standard drinks for males is excessive.
- Always carry some carbohydrate such as jellybeans in case of a ‘hypo’.
- Avoid alcohol after vigorous exercise.
- When drinking alcohol, always tell someone that you have diabetes.
- Always wear some form of diabetes identification.

** if there are no carbohydrate foods available, use a standard soft drink or fruit juice when mixing drinks. Otherwise use a low joule (diet) soft drink as a mixer.*

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Extra considerations

- Avoid alcohol if you are pregnant.
- Certain medications can react with alcohol. If you are taking any other medications, ask your doctor whether it's safe to drink alcohol.

Frequently asked questions

Is it better to drink sugary alcoholic drinks to avoid 'hypos' caused by alcohol?

Having a carbohydrate snack when drinking alcohol is preferable to drinking alcohol which contains a lot of sugar. However, if no carbohydrate foods are available, mixers containing sugar (eg. fruit juice, lemonade, cola, cordial) can be used for every second drink (remember low risk drinking limits).

I heard that a moderate amount of alcohol might be good for my heart. Is this true?

Studies have shown that a small amount of alcohol (no more than one standard drink a day) may decrease the risk of heart disease in people over the age of 40. More studies are needed to show whether it has the same protective effect at a younger age.

Is red wine better for the heart than other alcoholic drinks?

All types of alcohol seem to be protective. Some studies have suggested that red wine may be slightly more protective due to the antioxidants it contains but this remains to be proven.

I don't drink alcohol. Should I start drinking it to help reduce my risk of heart disease?

No, there is no evidence to suggest that non-drinkers should start to drink. Other lifestyle factors such as a healthy eating plan and regular physical activity are far more important.

Always check with your doctor, dietitian or diabetes educator about whether you can drink alcohol with safety.



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