

Understanding the Link Between Alcohol and Cancer to BUILD HEALTHIER NORTH CAROLINA COMMUNITIES

Alcohol is a group 1 carcinogen, which is the highest group of cancer-causing agents, like tobacco, asbestos, and radiation. **Drinking any type of alcohol, including red and white wine, beer, and liquor, increases the risk of cancer. The more alcohol you drink, the higher your risk.**

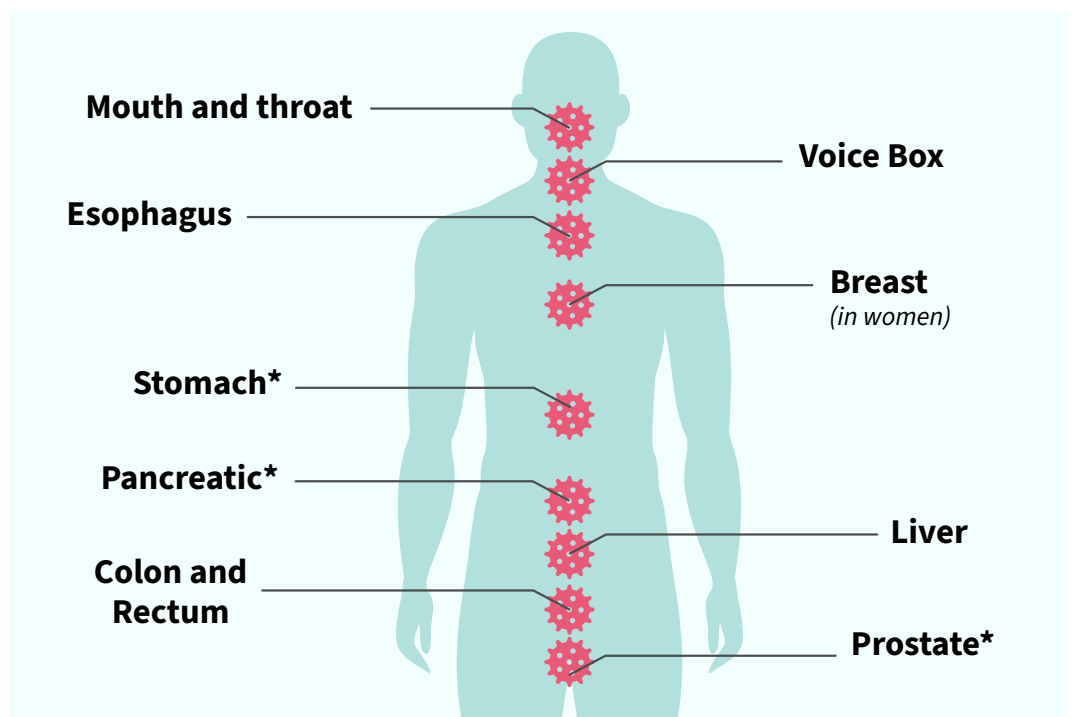
Alcohol increases cancer risk in several ways:

- **The body breaks alcohol down into a chemical, known as acetaldehyde, that can damage your DNA.** DNA is vital for our growth, development, and overall health. Damaged DNA can cause cells to grow out of control and become cancer.
- **Alcohol increases oxidative stress that increases inflammation.** Oxidative stress can damage DNA, proteins, and cells.
- **Alcohol increases hormone levels** (such as estrogen). Increased hormone levels can increase the risk of certain cancers, such as breast cancer.
- **Alcohol makes it easier for cells to absorb other cancer-causing chemicals.** For example, alcohol increases the absorption of carcinogens from tobacco if you use both substances.

Drinking less, or not at all, can lower the risk of several types of cancer.

Any alcohol use increases the risk of getting several types of cancer, including²: mouth and throat, esophagus, voice box, colon and rectum, liver, and breast (in women).

**Some studies have shown that a high level of alcohol use can also increase the risk of these cancers.*



To lower your risk of cancer, you can choose to drink less alcohol or to not drink at all.

It's important to understand how much alcohol is in a drink so that you can make informed decisions if you do choose to drink. The alcohol content of different types of beer, wine, and liquor may vary. For example, one drink can be³:



Beer:

12 fluid ounces, 5% alcohol by volume (ABV)



Craft Beer:

4-12 fluid ounces, 5-15% ABV



Malt Liquor:

8 fluid ounces, 7% ABV



Hard Seltzers:

12 fluid ounces, 4-12% ABV



Wine:

5 fluid ounces, 12% ABV



Distilled Spirits:

1.5 fluid ounces, 40% ABV (80 proof)

Drinking Levels Defined⁴

MODERATE

1 drink or less in a day for women,
2 drinks or less in a day for men.



BINGE

4 or more drinks on one occasion
for women, 5 or more drinks on
one occasion for men.



HEAVY

8 or more drinks during a week
from women, 15 or more drinks
during a week for men.



Additional Resources

- For tips to reduce your alcohol use, please see [the Center for Disease Control and Prevention's Tip to Drink Less.](#)
- For more information about cancer in NC, please visit the NCDHHS [Cancer Prevention and Control Branch Website.](#)
- To learn more about the goals and strategic actions for reducing cancer burden in NC, please see the [2020-2025 North Carolina Comprehensive Cancer Control Action Plan.](#)
- For more information about alcohol and cancer, please visit the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's Alcohol and Cancer Website.](#)
- For data on alcohol-attributable cancer in North Carolina, please see the [Alcohol and Cancer Data Slides.](#)
- For more data on alcohol use and its related harms, please visit the [NC Alcohol and Related Harms Data Dashboard.](#)
- For general information and prevention strategies to reduce excessive alcohol use and its related harms, please visit the [North Carolina Alcohol Use and Related Harms Website.](#)

References

1. United States. Public Health Service. Office of the Surgeon General. (2025). Alcohol and Cancer Risk: The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Found at: <https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/oash-alcohol-cancer-risk.pdf>
2. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2025, January 29). Alcohol and cancer. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. <https://www.cdc.gov/cancer/risk-factors/alcohol.html>
3. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Alcohol drink size calculator - rethinking drinking. National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism. <https://rethinkingdrinking.niaaa.nih.gov/tools/calculators/drink-size-calculator>
4. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. (2025, February). Understanding alcohol drinking patterns. National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism. <https://www.niaaa.nih.gov/alcohols-effects-health/alcohol-drinking-patterns>

This presentation is partially supported by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) as part of a financial assistance award totaling \$166,667. The contents are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the official views of, nor an endorsement, by CDC/HHS, or the U.S. Government.