



Cancer and Alcohol

The Low-Risk Alcohol Drinking Guidelines (LRDGs) are based on research and were created to provide Canadians with recommendations for alcohol consumption that could limit their health and safety risks. Multiple risks were taken into account when developing these guidelines. However, individuals who want to reduce specifically their risk of developing cancer can follow more specific guidelines.

Does Drinking Alcohol Cause Cancer?

Alcohol consumption is an important known cause of cancer. Drinking as little as one drink a day on average can increase the risk for developing cancer of the breast, colon and rectum, esophagus, larynx, liver, mouth and pharynx.

Drinking Guidelines to Reduce the Risk of Developing Cancer

To reduce long-term health risks for **multiple chronic illnesses**, the LRDGs recommend:

- Women consume no more than 10 drinks a week and no more than two drinks a day most days; and
- Men consume no more than 15 drinks a week and no more than three drinks a day most days.

The LRDGs were determined by balancing the findings that individuals aged 45 and older can experience some health benefits for certain conditions from low levels of alcohol consumption (e.g., lower risk of ischemic heart disease, stroke and diabetes), while also increasing the risk of other health concerns (e.g., certain forms of cancer and liver cirrhosis).

However, if an individual wants to specifically reduce his or her risk of developing cancer, the daily and weekly recommendations should be lower. If one chooses to drink alcohol, the Canadian Cancer Society recommends that **to reduce the risk of developing cancer**, keep it to less than:

- One drink a day for women and
- Two drinks a day for men.

Drinking 3.5 drinks a day can:

- Double or even triple the risk of developing cancer of the mouth, pharynx, larynx and esophagus
- Increase the risk of developing cancer of the colon, rectum and breast by 1.5 times





Remember, even small amounts of alcohol increase the risk of certain cancers, so the less alcohol you drink, the more you reduce the risk of developing cancer. Any type of alcohol – beer, wine or spirits – increases the risk of cancer. These cancer prevention drinking guidelines are lower than the guidelines in the LRDGs.

The Purpose of Cancer Prevention Drinking Guidelines

The LRDGs were based on large population-level studies of “all-cause mortality” or death by all causes. The studies compared the risk of premature death for those who consumed alcohol with people who never consumed alcohol. However, individuals often have more specific health concerns, such as cancer, and require more specific guidance in examining the role alcohol plays in their health and well-being.

The population-based LRDGs strike a balance between harms and benefits. For example, while having one drink per day increases the risk of several kinds of cancer, for some people 45 years of age and older consuming this amount of alcohol can reduce the risk of certain forms of heart disease. However, drinking for “health reasons” should be discouraged. Healthy eating, physical activity and not smoking can be more effective to improve heart health and health in general.

Drinking guidelines for cancer prevention are primarily based on research in which outcomes relate to cancer only. A focus on different outcomes can lead to different recommendations because the research considerations are different. Other guidelines for specific diseases help people and their healthcare providers identify their individual risk and tailor their alcohol consumption to personal circumstances.

Take Home Message

To be low risk, individuals must keep within the single-day and weekly limits for their gender, but they also need to remember that drinking within the LRDGs does not mean there is no risk to drinking.

Guidelines for specific illnesses will depend on each person’s risk for those conditions. It is impossible to provide guidelines for every disease and circumstance. However, those concerned about cancer should drink less than the guidelines specific to cancer and those concerned about other alcohol-related conditions should drink less than the limits recommended in the LRDGs.



Individuals can consult their healthcare providers to understand the impact of their drinking habits. Not drinking alcohol might be the healthiest choice.

Additional Resources

- [Canada's Low-Risk Alcohol Drinking Guidelines](#)
- [American Institute for Cancer Research](#)
- [Canadian Cancer Society](#)
- [Canadian Partnership Against Cancer](#)
- Women and Alcohol (LRDG Summary)
- Youth and Alcohol (LRDG Summary)

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