

alcohol & 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 small 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/calories (29 kilojoules per gram versus 16-17 kilojoules per gram for carbohydrate and protein) 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'. For example, 200ml of wine (2 standard drinks) contains 600 kilojoules, the same amount of kilojoules as 4 teaspoons of butter or margarine.

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 small amount of alcohol may protect some people against the development of 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. Alcohol can also make it more difficult to manage your diabetes.

For people who are on insulin or certain diabetes tablets, alcohol may increase the risk of hypoglycaemia ('hypos'). Refer to pages 3 and 4 for more information about alcohol-related 'hypos' and tips on how to reduce your risk of 'hypos'.



alcohol & diabetes

How much is 'too much'?

Research indicates that the alcohol recommendations for people with diabetes are no different to recommendations for the general population, which is currently 2 standard drinks a day.* It is best to drink alcohol with a meal or some carbohydrate-containing food and to include alcohol-free days.

Some people may need to have less alcohol than these general recommendations, due to their age, medication or the need to lose weight. It is therefore important to discuss drinking alcohol with your diabetes health care team.

If you are overweight, have had trouble managing your blood glucose, have high blood pressure, high triglycerides or other complications, you may be advised 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 | > 60ml fortified wine |
| > 100ml wine | > 30ml spirits |
| > 425ml low alcohol beer (less than 3% alcohol) | |

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 on the label of 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 two or more standard drinks.

What to choose?

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

Low carbohydrate 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.

Tips to reduce the amount you drink:

-
- > Drink some water or a diet soft drink before drinking any alcohol, so you're not thirsty.
-
- > Sip alcohol slowly.
-
- > Drink a non-alcoholic drink (eg: water or diet soft drink) between each alcoholic drink.
-
- > Dilute alcohol where possible such as making a beer shandy by mixing beer with low-joule lemonade or diluting wine with soda water.
-
- > 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 the glucose lowering effect of alcohol can last up to 24 hours after the last drink, sometimes even longer. 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 credentialled diabetes educator about any effects alcohol is likely to have on the tablets or insulin you are taking for your diabetes.

Why can alcohol-related 'hypos' be dangerous?

-
- > 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.
-
- > People may think you're drunk and therefore not offer to help.
-
- > The hypoglycaemia may be difficult to treat.
-

Tips to reduce your risk of 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 or 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. The more you drink, the greater your risk of hypoglycaemia.
- > Always carry some fast acting 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.

Alcohol and blood glucose monitoring

Alcohol blocks glucose production by the liver therefore it can cause delayed hypoglycaemia. Impairment of the senses by a combination of alcohol and hypoglycaemia is very dangerous.

Blood glucose levels should be checked regularly especially before going to bed and overnight if concerned.

A reduction in evening insulin may be needed to avoid overnight 'hypos' after drinking. Discuss this with your health professional. It may be wise to have a person wake you the next morning at an appropriate time to ensure that you are feeling well.

Bedtime snack

When drinking alcohol, it is recommended you have a carbohydrate containing snack before going to bed to help stabilise your blood glucose levels. Be aware that you may need extra carbohydrate than usual before bed to counteract the blood glucose lowering effect of alcohol. This may help to prevent a 'hypo'.

* 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.

Extra considerations

- > Avoid alcohol if you are pregnant, are planning pregnancy, have a history of alcohol abuse or dependence, have a health problem made worse by drinking such as liver disease, pancreatitis, significantly elevated triglycerides or advanced neuropathy.
 - > Certain medications can react with alcohol. If you are taking any other medications, ask your doctor whether it's safe to drink alcohol.
 - > For children and young people under 18 years of age, not drinking alcohol is the safest option.*
-

Frequently asked questions

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

Having a carbohydrate-containing 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?

Whilst red wine does contain some antioxidants, it is not the best choice for preventing coronary artery disease or maintaining heart health. Antioxidants are best consumed by eating at least five servings of vegetables and two servings of fruit per day. It is the amount of alcohol consumed (rather than type) that has the biggest impact on health.

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, accredited practising dietitian (APD) or diabetes educator about whether you can drink alcohol with safety.

* NHMRC, Australian Guidelines to Reduce Health Risks from Drinking Alcohol (2009).