



Alcohol and Your Health

It's a fact: alcohol is a prevalent part of our social lives. We unwind by drinking a beer or two at the game or having a glass of wine with dinner. We toast holidays and special occasions with champagne.

While there may be nothing wrong with unwinding with your favorite drink during a night out with friends, first you should understand exactly what that Margarita does to your body - and more importantly, what four Margaritas will do.

Alcohol and the body

Before you take a sip, it's important to know how alcohol affects you specifically and how many drinks you can have before you become intoxicated. While many health experts typically agree that moderate alcohol consumption is safe for most people, alcohol can be damaging to your health - and even deadly - if you drink too much of it.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), ethyl alcohol (or ethanol) is a central nervous system depressant - and psychoactive drug - present in beer, wine, and hard liquor. It is produced by the fermentation of yeast, sugars, and starches.¹

When you drink alcohol, it is rapidly absorbed from your stomach and small intestine, passes into the bloodstream, and is then widely distributed throughout your body. What happens next depends on you: your size, whether you're male or female, your age, and any number of other factors. Most critical, however, is how much you decide to drink.

In general, if you stop after a drink or two, you'll likely experience the relaxing effects of alcohol - the "buzz." You may feel calm and in good spirits. Drink a few more, however, and you may begin to feel some of the drug's adverse effects:

- Impaired judgment
- Reduced reaction time
- Slurred speech
- Difficulty walking

In other words, you feel "drunk." By the CDC's definition, being drunk (intoxicated) is simply "overdosing" on alcohol.

Visit the CDA Web site for more information: www.disabilitycanhappen.org



WHAT IS A DRINK?

A standard drink is:

- One 12-oz. bottle of beer or wine cooler
- One 5-oz. glass of wine
- 1.5 oz. of 80-proof distilled spirits(hard liquor)

Each of these drinks contains about half an ounce of alcohol. Remember: the alcohol content of different types of beer, wine, and distilled spirits can vary substantially.

Adverse effects of heavy drinking

When you drink alcohol quickly and in large amounts, it can result in coma and even death.

Alcohol also can interact with a number of prescription and over-the-counter medications, intensifying the effects of the alcohol, the medications, or both. In fact, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) requires all over-the-counter pain relievers and fever reducers to carry a warning label advising those who consume three or more drinks a day to consult with their doctors before taking the medication.

Doctors generally advise pregnant women to avoid drinking alcohol altogether, as it can cause serious damage to the developing fetus. If you're pregnant or thinking of becoming pregnant, be sure to talk to your doctor about the effects alcohol can have on you and your baby.

Excessive drinking ...

According to the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA), excessive drinking - including binge drinking, which is defined as consuming more than five drinks (for men) or four drinks (for women) within a short period of time - causes a number of chronic (long-term) and acute (short-term) health effects. Women may develop alcohol-related health problems sooner than men - and from drinking less alcohol. Because alcohol affects nearly every organ of the body, long-term excessive drinking increases the risk for many serious health problems.²

Alcohol-related liver disease - Approximately 10 to 20 percent of heavy drinkers develop alcoholic cirrhosis, or scarring of the liver. Alcoholic cirrhosis can be fatal if drinking continues. It's not reversible, but if a person with cirrhosis stops drinking, his or her chances of survival greatly improve. In addition, some drinkers develop alcoholic hepatitis - or inflammation of the liver - as a result of heavy drinking over a period of time.

Visit the CDA Web site for more information: www.disabilitycanhappen.org



Heart disease - Recent studies have shown that moderate drinking can have beneficial effects on the heart, especially among those at greatest risk for heart attacks. However, excessive drinking over a long period can lead to serious health problems such as heart disease, high blood pressure, high triglyceride levels, and certain kinds of stroke. Seek your doctor's advice if you are considering drinking alcohol for health benefits.

Cancer - Excessive drinking over an extended period of time increases the risk of certain forms of cancer, including cancer of the esophagus, mouth, throat, and larynx. It may also increase the risk for developing cancer of the colon and rectum.

Pancreatitis - The pancreas helps regulate the body's blood sugar levels by producing insulin, and it also assists in digestion. Long-term heavy drinking can lead to pancreatitis, or

inflammation of the pancreas. Chronic pancreatitis can cause pain, diarrhea, and weight loss. Acute pancreatitis may be fatal.

The CDC also attributes other health consequences to excessive drinking, including:

- Weight gain
- Fetal alcohol syndrome in an unborn child
- Falls
- Domestic violence
- Rape
- Child abuse
- Motor vehicle injuries.

How much is too much?

As mentioned earlier, most health experts generally suggest "moderate" consumption of alcohol for otherwise healthy individuals. But what is moderate for you?

Drinking in moderation ...

Based on current dietary guidelines from the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA)³, moderate drinking is defined as:

- Women - one drink or less per day
- Men - two drinks or less per day

Keep in mind, individual reactions to alcohol vary greatly - which is why some of your friends may be able to drink more than you and not become intoxicated as quickly. In addition, a variety of other factors influence the effect alcohol has on you:

- Age
- Gender

Visit the CDA Web site for more information: www.disabilitycanhappen.org

The Council for Disability Awareness



- Race
- Ethnicity
- Physical condition
- The amount of food you've eaten prior to drinking
- Whether you're taking certain drugs or medicines
- Family history of alcohol problems

Heavy drinking ...

According to the CDC, a person may be engaging in heavy or "excessive" drinking if they exceed the guidelines for daily alcohol consumption:

- Women - more than three drinks per day
- Men - more than four drinks per day

The NIAAA also provides guidelines for average daily alcohol consumption. Refer to www.niaaa.nih.gov for more information.

Those who should not drink ...

The current guidelines specify that for certain individuals any alcohol consumption may be too much - therefore, they should not drink at all. They include:

- Anyone under the age of 21
- People of any age who are unable to restrict their drinking to moderate levels
- Women who are pregnant or who may become pregnant
- People who plan to drive, operate machinery, or participate in other activities requiring attention, skill, or coordination
- Those who are taking prescription or over-the-counter medications that can interact with alcohol.

DO YOU HAVE A DRINKING PROBLEM?

According to the CDC, you may have a problem with excessive drinking if it causes trouble in your relationships, school, social activities, or in how you think and feel.

Consider the following questions if you or someone you know might have a drinking problem:

- Have you ever felt you should cut down on your drinking?
- Does it annoy you when people criticize your drinking?
- Have you ever felt bad or guilty about drinking?
- Have you ever had a drink first thing in the morning to steady your nerves or to rid yourself of a hangover?
- Do you ever engage in "secretive" drinking (i.e., drinking alone, hiding your drinking from family and friends)?

Visit the CDA Web site for more information: www.disabilitycanhappen.org

The Council for Disability Awareness



- Do you find your tolerance for alcohol has increased - meaning you're able to drink more before you feel its effects?
- Have you ever experienced "blackouts" or had trouble remembering what you said or did while you were drinking?
- Have you experienced problems related to your drinking (DWI/DUI, school trouble, job warnings, fights, etc.)?

Did you answer "yes" to any of these questions? Even if you didn't, if you are having alcohol-related problems with your job, relationships, health, or the law, be sure to talk it over with your doctor.

Where to go for help:

Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) World Services	(212) 870-3400	www.aa.org
National Association for Children of Alcoholics (NACoA)	(888) 554-COAS or (301) 468-0985	www.nacoa.net
National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence (NCADD)	(800) 622-2255	www.ncadd.org
Substance Abuse Treatment Facility Locator	(800) 662-HELP (800-662-4357)	www.findtreatment.samhsa.gov/

1. [Alcohol and Public Health](#). Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Department of Health and Human Services. 31 Jan. 2005.
2. [National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism \(NIAAA\)](#). National Institutes of Health. Updated July 2005.
3. [Dietary Guidelines for Americans 2005](#). [Nutrition.gov](http://www.nutrition.gov). United States Department of Agriculture - www.usda.gov. 13 July 2005. Dietary Guidelines for Americans 2005. [Nutrition.gov](http://www.nutrition.gov). 12 Jan 2005.

Visit the CDA Web site for more information: www.disabilitycanhappen.org