

# Alcohol: Frequently Asked Questions



Excessive drinking both in the form of heavy drinking or binge drinking is associated with numerous health problems, including:

- Chronic diseases such as cirrhosis; pancreatitis; various cancers, including liver, mouth, throat, larynx, and esophagus; high blood pressure; and psychological disorders
- Unintentional injuries, such as motor vehicle traffic crashes, falls, drowning, burns, and firearm injuries
- Violence, such as child maltreatment, homicide, and suicide
- Harm to a developing fetus if a woman drinks while pregnant, such as fetal alcohol spectrum disorders
- Sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS)
- Alcohol use disorders

## What Is Binge Drinking?

Binge drinking is defined as a pattern of alcohol consumption that brings the blood alcohol concentration (BAC) level to 0.08% or more. This pattern of drinking usually corresponds to 5 or more drinks on a single occasion for men or 4 or more drinks on a single occasion for women, generally within about 2 hours.

## What Is Alcohol?

Ethyl alcohol, or ethanol, is an intoxicating ingredient found in beer, wine, and liquor. Alcohol is produced by the fermentation of yeast, sugars, and starches.

## Why Do Some People React Differently To Alcohol Than Others?

Alcohol affects every organ in the body. It is a central nervous system depressant that is rapidly absorbed from the stomach and small intestine into the bloodstream. Alcohol is metabolized in the liver by enzymes. However, the liver can only metabolize a small amount of alcohol at a time, leaving the excess alcohol to circulate throughout the body. The intensity of the effect of alcohol on the body is directly related to the amount consumed.

## What Is A Standard Drink In The United States?

A standard drink is equal to 14.0 grams (0.6 ounces) of pure alcohol. Generally, this amount of pure alcohol is found in:

- 12 ounces of beer (5% alcohol content)
- 8 ounces of malt liquor (7% alcohol content)
- 5 ounces of wine (12% alcohol content)
- 1.5 ounces or a “shot” of 80-proof (40% alcohol content) distilled spirits or liquor (e.g., gin, rum, vodka, whiskey)

## Is Beer Or Wine Safer To Drink Than Liquor?

No. One 12-ounce beer has about the same amount of alcohol as one 5-ounce glass of wine or 1.5-ounce shot of liquor. It is the amount of alcohol consumed that affects a person most, not the type of alcoholic drink.

## What Does Moderate Drinking Mean?

According to the *Dietary Guidelines for Americans*, moderate alcohol consumption is defined as having up to 1 drink per day for women and up to 2 drinks per day for men. This definition refers to the amount consumed on any single day and is not intended as an average over several days. However, the *Dietary Guidelines* do not recommend that people who do not drink alcohol start drinking for any reason.

## What Is Excessive Alcohol Use?

Excessive alcohol use includes binge drinking, heavy drinking, alcohol use by people under the age 21 (the minimum legal drinking age), and any alcohol use by pregnant women.

## What Is Meant By Heavy Drinking?

For men, heavy drinking is typically defined as consuming 15 drinks or more per week. For women, heavy drinking is typically defined as consuming 8 drinks or more per week.



**CONNECTICUT  
Clearinghouse**  
a program of the Connecticut Center  
for Prevention, Wellness and Recovery

**800.232.4424 (phone)**

**860.793.9813 (fax)**

**[www.ctclearinghouse.org](http://www.ctclearinghouse.org)**

A Library and Resource Center on Alcohol, Tobacco, Other Drugs, Mental Health and Wellness

## Is Drinking Bad For An Adolescent's Health?

Yes. Studies have shown that alcohol use by adolescents and young adults increases the risk of fatal and nonfatal injuries. Also, people who use alcohol before age 15 are six times more likely to become alcohol dependent than adults who begin drinking at age 21. Other consequences of youth alcohol use include increased risky sexual behaviors, poor school performance, and increased risk of suicide and homicide.

## Is It Okay To Drink When Pregnant?

No. There is no safe level of alcohol use during pregnancy. Women who are pregnant or plan on becoming pregnant should not drink alcohol. Several conditions, including fetal alcohol spectrum disorders, have been linked to alcohol use during pregnancy.

## What Does It Mean To Get Drunk?

"Getting drunk" or intoxicated is the result of consuming excessive amounts of alcohol. Binge drinking typically results in acute intoxication. Alcohol intoxication can be harmful for a variety of reasons, including:

- Impaired brain function resulting in poor judgment, reduced reaction time, loss of balance and motor skills, or slurred speech
- Dilation of blood vessels resulting in rapid loss of body heat
- Increased risk of certain cancers, stroke, and cirrhosis, particularly when excessive amounts of alcohol are consumed over extended periods of time
- Damage to a developing fetus if consumed by pregnant women
- Increased risk of motor vehicle traffic crashes, violence, and other injuries
- Coma and death can occur if alcohol is consumed rapidly and in large amounts

## Is It Safe To Drink Alcohol And Drive?

No. Alcohol use slows reaction time and impairs judgment and coordination, which are all skills needed to drive a car safely.

## What Does It Mean To Be Above The Legal Limit For Drinking?

The legal limit for drinking is the alcohol level above which a person is subject to legal penalties (e.g., arrest or loss of a driver's license).

- Legal limits are measured using either a blood alcohol test or a breathalyzer.
- Legal limits are typically defined by state law, and may vary according to individual characteristics, such as age and occupation.

All states in the United States have adopted 0.08% (80 mg/dL) as the legal limit for operating a motor vehicle for drivers aged 21 years or older (except for Utah, which adopted a 0.05% legal limit in 2018). However, drivers younger than 21 are not allowed to operate a motor vehicle with any level of alcohol in their system.

Note: Legal limits do not define a level below which it is safe to operate a vehicle or engage in some other activity. Impairment due to alcohol use begins to occur at levels well below the legal limit.

## Do All Excessive Drinkers Have An Alcohol Use Disorder?

No. About 90% of people who drink excessively would not be expected to meet the clinical diagnostic criteria for having a severe alcohol use disorder. A severe alcohol use disorder, previously known as alcohol dependence or alcoholism, is a chronic disease. Some of the signs and symptoms of a severe alcohol use disorder could include:

- Inability to limit drinking
- Continuing to drink despite personal or professional problems
- Needing to drink more to get the same effect
- Wanting a drink so badly you can't think of anything else

## How Does A Person Know If They Have A Drinking Problem?

Drinking is a problem if it causes trouble in a person's relationships, in school, in social activities, or in how they think and feel. If a person is concerned that either they or someone in their family might have a drinking problem, they should consult their personal health care provider. Another resource is Connecticut's 24/7 Access Line at 1-800-563-4086, which can provide a person with information about treatment programs in their local community and allow them to speak with someone about alcohol problems.

## Connecticut Resources

CT Department of Mental  
Health and Addiction Services

<https://portal.ct.gov/dmhas>

24/7 Access Line

1.800.563.4086

CCAR Recovery Coaching

<https://ccar.us/>

## National Resources

Substance Abuse and Mental  
Health Services Administration

[www.samhsa.gov](http://www.samhsa.gov)

