

Alcohol

Most people can enjoy a small amount of alcohol. However, drinking too much alcohol can be harmful to your health. When you have diabetes, there are some extra considerations if you choose to drink.

Alcohol can have a number of different effects on your body, including:

Weight gain – alcohol has very little nutritional value and is high in kilojoules/calories. If you consume alcohol in large amounts, or on a regular basis, it can lead to weight gain.

Making it difficult to manage your diabetes – drinking alcohol can cause both high and low blood glucose levels. It can also make it easy to forget about looking after your diabetes.

Damage to the body – drinking large amounts of alcohol can be extremely dangerous. It can affect 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 some cancers.

Risk of complications – too much alcohol can increase the risk of developing complications related to diabetes. This is because alcohol can contribute to weight gain, increase triglycerides (blood fats) and raise blood pressure.

Alcohol and hypoglycaemia

If you are taking insulin or certain diabetes tablets, you are at risk of alcohol-related hypoglycaemia (hypos). A hypo is when blood glucose levels drop below 4mmol/L. Hypos can occur while drinking alcohol – or many hours afterwards – and can be dangerous.

Normally, the liver releases stored glucose if your blood glucose level falls too low. However, when you drink alcohol, the liver always processes the alcohol first, instead of releasing stored glucose. This can increase the risk of a hypo. Alcohol can also reduce your ability to recognise the symptoms of a hypo and make it more difficult to treat.

Ask your doctor or diabetes health professional whether you might be at increased risk of alcohol-related hypos.



Helpline 1300 136 588

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Tips to reduce your risk of hypos

- Avoid drinking excessive amounts of alcohol. The more you drink, the greater your risk of a hypo.
- Don't drink alcohol on an empty stomach. Make sure you have a meal containing carbohydrate foods (such as rice, potato, pasta or bread) before drinking alcohol, or that you have snacks that contain carbohydrate* while drinking.
- Talk to your doctor about whether you should check your blood glucose levels when you drink alcohol. Your doctor may recommend checking your blood glucose levels more often (this might include checking before bed and again overnight, if possible).
- Always carry some hypo treatment, such as jelly beans or glucose tablets.
- When drinking alcohol, make sure you have someone with you who knows you have diabetes and who understands how to treat a hypo if needed.
- Always wear some form of diabetes identification – otherwise, people may mistake your hypo symptoms for being drunk, and you may not get the help you need to treat your hypo.
- Never stop taking your insulin to avoid having a hypo while drinking. Ask your diabetes educator for information on drinking safely when taking insulin.
- Eat a snack containing carbohydrate before you go to bed.
- Ask someone to wake you up in the morning to check that you are ok. If you self-monitor your blood glucose levels, check them when you get up and have breakfast as soon as you can.
- Avoid alcohol after vigorous exercise.



How much alcohol is safe?

Current guidelines for alcohol recommend no more than two standard drinks per day for both men and women. This recommendation is the same for people with or without diabetes.

You may be advised to drink less – or not at all – if you:

- » are above the healthy weight range
- » have trouble managing your blood glucose levels
- » have high blood pressure or triglycerides
- » have diabetes-related complications.

If you have other health conditions that are made worse by drinking, such as liver disease or pancreatitis, you may also be advised not to drink. Women who are pregnant, planning a pregnancy or breastfeeding should not drink alcohol. Alcohol is also not recommended for people under the age of 18, as it can affect brain development and function.

Some medications can react with alcohol. If you are taking any medications, ask your doctor or pharmacist whether you can drink alcohol when taking these.

* If there are no carbohydrate foods available, use a standard soft drink or fruit juice if you are having mixed drinks. If you are eating carbohydrate foods while drinking, use a diet soft drink as a mixer.

What is a standard drink?

A standard drink contains 10g of alcohol. It's important to know what a standard drink is for different types of alcohol so you can monitor your intake.

One standard drink is equal to:

- » 285ml of regular beer
- » 375ml of mid-strength beer
- » 425ml of low-alcohol beer (less than 3% alcohol)
- » 60ml of fortified wine
- » 100ml of wine
- » 30ml of spirits.

It's easy to over-estimate a standard drink, so it's a good idea to:

- » check the number of standard drinks on the label of the bottle/can
- » measure out a standard drink into a glass, so you know what it looks like
- » be aware that many wine glasses can hold two or more standard drinks.



What should you choose?

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

Low-carbohydrate (low-carb) beers offer no advantage over regular beers. In fact, they are often higher in alcohol, which can be more of a problem for your diabetes management.

Ask your doctor, dietitian or diabetes educator about drinking alcohol safely.



Tips for drinking less alcohol

- Drink some water or a diet soft drink before drinking any alcohol, so that you are not thirsty.
- Choose low-alcohol (not low-carb) beer.
- Sip alcoholic drinks slowly.
- Alternate your alcoholic drinks with water.
- Dilute alcoholic drinks with non-alcoholic mixers to reduce the alcohol content – such as mixing beer with diet lemonade to make a shandy or mixing soda water with wine.
- Make sure you have regular alcohol-free days.

The NDSS and you

The NDSS provides a range of services to help you manage your diabetes. These include our Infoline and website for advice on diabetes management, NDSS products and a range of support programs to help you learn more about managing your diabetes.

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