

The link between alcohol and cancer: 'No amount is safe'

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Alcohol-related cancer death takes away an average of 18 potential years from a person's life

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Even moderate alcohol use may substantially increase the risk of dying from [cancer](#), according to a new study published online February 14 in the [American Journal of Public Health](#). Alcohol use accounts for about 3.5 percent of all U.S. cancer deaths annually, according to the study. Most deaths seemed to occur among people who consumed more than three alcoholic drinks a day, but those who consumed 1.5 beverages daily may account for up to one-third of those deaths, the researchers found.

Researchers examined seven types of cancers known to be linked to alcohol use: cancers of the mouth and pharynx, larynx, esophagus, liver, colon, rectum and female breast.

Approximately 560,000 people died from cancer in 2009, the year for which the researchers analyzed alcohol-related cancer death rates. Of those deaths, nearly 20,000 were caused by alcohol-linked cancers. Breast cancer accounted for the most common alcohol-related cancer deaths among women, contributing to 15 percent of all breast-cancer deaths. Among men, cancers of the mouth, pharynx, larynx and esophagus accounted for the most alcohol-linked cancer deaths.

"The relationship between alcohol and cancer is strong, but is not widely appreciated by the public and remains underemphasized even by physicians," senior author Dr. Timothy Naimi, an associate professor of medicine at Boston University School of Medicine, said in a Boston University [release](#). "Alcohol is a big preventable cancer risk factor that has been hiding in plain sight."

The study determined that alcohol-related cancer death took away an average of 18 potential years from a person's life. Naimi said. "When it comes to cancer, there is no safe level of alcohol consumption."

Although it's not exactly clear why alcohol increases cancer risk, one conclusion in the 2013 book [Every Silver Lining Has a Cloud](#) is that the alcohol – or the acetaldehyde byproduct of the body's metabolism of alcohol – damages DNA material in cells of [alcohol abusers](#), those with the [disease of alcoholism](#) or even "social" drinkers. Among the alcohol/cancer links cited in the book from various studies were:

- "significantly" higher risks for cancers of the pharynx, oral cavity and larynx and higher rates for cancers of the esophagus and rectum.
- alcohol users are 1.6 times more likely to develop pancreatic cancer, the most fatal of cancers.
- an estimated 75 percent of esophageal cancers in the U.S. are attributable to chronic, excessive alcohol consumption and nearly 50 percent of cancers of the mouth, pharynx, and larynx are associated with heavy drinking.
- breast cancer risks increase 10 percent for every 10 grams of alcohol consumed daily. That's about one drink, as reported in the [Journal of the American Medical Association](#) (JAMA) November 2, 2011. Women who consumed even "modest" amounts of alcohol (equivalent to 3-6 glasses of wine per week) were linked with a 15 percent increase of developing the disease. Researchers also found

that the increased risk of breast cancer for those who drank at least two drinks daily was 51 percent higher compared to women who never drank alcohol.

- gastritis – sharp stomach pains – and gastric ulcers are very common results of regular alcohol use and can last for years after abstinence. Alcohol slows the emptying of the stomach, which allows more acid to build up in the stomach and therefore more time for it to permanently damage the stomach lining. Gastric adenocarcinoma, the most common stomach cancer, arises from those cells in the stomach lining. Researchers evaluated information from the European Prospective Investigation into Cancer and Nutrition (EPIC) study. As reported in the *American Journal of Clinical Nutrition*, more than 400 cases of stomach cancer were diagnosed among EPIC study participants. Men who consumed an average of more than four drinks per day were 65 percent more likely to develop stomach cancer than men who were very light drinkers. The link between alcohol and stomach cancer appeared to be stronger for beer than for wine or spirits.

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