

# 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 things to consider when you drink alcohol.

Alcohol can have many different effects on your body, including:

**Weight gain** – alcohol has very little nutritional value and is high in kilojoules/calories. If you drink 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. Alcohol may also affect your judgement when looking after your diabetes.

**Damage to the body** – drinking large amounts of alcohol can be extremely dangerous. It can affect many different parts of your body, including your brain, nerves, liver and pancreas. Too much alcohol can also increase your 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 drops 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 make it harder to recognise the symptoms of, and to treat, a hypo.

When drinking, it's important that your friends and family understand the signs of a hypo and what the symptoms are.

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





### Tips to reduce your risk of hypos

- Talk to your diabetes health care team about whether you might be at risk of alcohol related hypos and if so, how to reduce your risk.
- Avoid drinking large amounts of alcohol. 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 snacks that contain carbohydrate\* while drinking.
- Talk to your health care team about whether you should check your blood glucose levels when you drink alcohol. They 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 the effects of excessive alcohol, and you may not get the help you need.
- Never stop taking your insulin to avoid having a hypo while drinking. Ask your diabetes health care team 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 monitor your blood glucose levels, check them when you get up and then eat breakfast as soon as you can.

- Avoid alcohol after vigorous exercise. Sometimes you may drink alcohol while dancing.
- Discuss this with your diabetes health care team.



### 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 (blood fats)
- » 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 (non-diet) soft drink or fruit juice if you are having mixed drinks. If you are eating carbohydrate foods while drinking, use a diet soft drink, plain mineral or plain soda water 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:

- » 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 overestimate the size of 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 generally 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 or plain mineral or soda water.

Low-carbohydrate (low-carb) beers offer no advantage over regular beers.

Ask your diabetes health care team about drinking alcohol safely.



### Tips for drinking less alcohol

- Drink some water 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 non-alcoholic drinks such as water or mineral or soda 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

A wide range of services and support is available through the NDSS to help you manage your diabetes. This includes information on diabetes management through the NDSS Helpline and website. The products, services and education programs available can help you stay on top of your diabetes.

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