

# Alcohol use, even at low levels, increases risk of developing disease, finds systematic review

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Even low levels of alcohol use can increase the likelihood of developing diseases like cancer and heart disease. A systematic review of studies of the relationship between alcohol use and risk of disease published in

*Alcohol: Clinical and Experimental Research* found that disease risk increases as alcohol use increases and high levels of alcohol use have clear detrimental health effects.

While lower-level alcohol use can be protective against certain diseases, it can have significant adverse health effects for many other diseases. The authors urge greater awareness that any level of alcohol use can increase a person's risk of developing serious, even fatal, diseases.

The review examined high-quality studies of the dose-response risk relationships between alcohol use and disease for 18 diseases identified by international health organizations as having a causal relationship with alcohol use and which, in most cases, can be fatal. For all conditions included in the review, the risk of developing the disease increased as alcohol use increased.

At all doses examined, alcohol use was associated with significant increases in risk for tuberculosis, lower respiratory infections, oral cavity and pharyngeal cancers, esophageal cancer, [colorectal cancer](#), [liver cancer](#), laryngeal cancer, epilepsy, hypertension, [liver cirrhosis](#) and, in men, pancreatitis. Low-dose alcohol use had protective effects against coronary [heart disease](#), stroke, and brain hemorrhage in both men and women and against diabetes and pancreatitis in women. However, low-dose alcohol use increased the risk for other diseases.

Men who had one standard drink per day had a significant protective effect against stroke; but had significant increases in health risks for tuberculosis, lower respiratory infections, diabetes, epilepsy, hypertension, [atrial fibrillation](#), cirrhosis, pancreatitis, and several types of cancer, including of the pharynx, esophagus, liver, larynx, colon, and rectum.

Similarly, low-level [alcohol use](#) by women conferred a significant

protective effect against the risk for diabetes, stroke, and pancreatitis, but at those same levels, their risk significantly increased for high blood pressure, epilepsy, hypertension, atrial fibrillation, cirrhosis, tuberculosis, lower respiratory infections, and many types of cancer, including breast cancer, oral cavity, and pharynx cancer, [esophageal cancer](#), colorectal cancer, liver cancer, larynx cancer.

The authors culled through 6,000 articles published between 2017 and March 2021, selecting the fourteen meta-analyses that met the study criteria to include in their systematic review, updating the findings of the 2020 Australian Guidelines to Reduce Health Risks from Drinking Alcohol (2007–2020).

**More information:** Christine Levesque et al, A systematic review of relative risks for the relationships between chronic alcohol use and the occurrence of disease, *Alcohol: Clinical and Experimental Research* (2023). [DOI: 10.1111/acer.15121](https://doi.org/10.1111/acer.15121)

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