

Drinking and the risk of cancer

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Credit: Roswell Park Cancer Institute

It's no secret that drinking alcohol is a risk factor for cancer. The National Cancer Institute says alcohol use is associated with a higher risk of developing cancers of the head and neck, esophagus, liver, breast, colon and rectum.

Now there's added reason to re-think your drinking habits. A statement published recently by the American Society of Clinical Oncology (ASCO) sounds an alarm about alcohol's role in causing cancer and—for those who continue to drink after a cancer diagnosis—raising the chances that the cancer will return after treatment or that new types of cancer will develop. The statement notes that the risk of death from cancer "is increased significantly in moderate drinkers and heavy drinkers."

Does that mean you have to say no to a glass of wine at a holiday party or a beer with friends? It's important to look at the big picture, says Christine Ambrosone, PhD, Senior Vice President of Population Sciences, Chair of Cancer Prevention and Control, and the Roswell Park Alliance Foundation Endowed Chair in Cancer Prevention.

- First, consider how much you drink on a

regular basis. ASCO says cancer risk is highest among heavy or moderate drinkers. "Moderate drinking is defined as up to one drink per day for women or up to two drinks per day for men," notes Dr. Ambrosone. "That's not just having a drink over the holidays—that's every day." (If you imbibe less often, be aware that "some cancer risk persists even at low levels of [alcohol] consumption," according to ASCO.)

- Second, be aware that if you drink and smoke, your [cancer risk](#) increases dramatically. Dr. Ambrosone says that in the case of esophageal cancer, "it's thought that the alcohol primes the airways so they're much more susceptible to the cancer-causing effects of tobacco smoke."
- Finally, think about any other risk factors you might have that can also contribute to your risk, including obesity, poor diet, lack of exercise, or inherited genetic mutations linked to [cancer](#).

After you've weighed the evidence in light of your personal lifestyle, you're ready to make a decision. Dr. Ambrosone's advice: "Everything in moderation."

Provided by Roswell Park Cancer Institute

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