

Alcohol and cancer

There is no scientific consensus on why some people develop cancer and others don't. Your genes and your lifestyle choices interact, and together they make up your risk of developing cancer.

This means that your patterns of drinking, the amount you drink and your dependence on alcohol are all factors in your risk of developing alcohol-related cancers. Other lifestyle factors – whether you smoke, take drugs, eat healthily and exercise regularly – are also relevant to the development of cancer, as is your genetic make-up. This is probably true for all cancers, but the actual genes responsible for this have only been found in some types of cancer, such as breast cancer.

FACTS and FIGURES

It is clear from a number of large scale studies that there is a link between alcohol consumption and cancer. One in five (20%) of all alcohol-related deaths are due to cancer.⁽¹⁾ This makes it the second largest cause of deaths due to alcohol, after intentional and unintentional injuries.

These studies clearly show that people with higher levels of alcohol consumption are more likely to develop certain kinds of cancer. The strongest associations with alcohol consumption are for liver cancer and bowel cancer. But alcohol is also definitely associated with an increased risk of developing breast cancer and mouth cancer.

Breast cancer

Recent studies have found that even moderate alcohol consumption can increase the risk of developing breast cancer. The largest of these is the Million Women Study, run by Oxford University. This is an ongoing study involving 1.3 million women across the UK.⁽²⁾ Data has been gathered about the lifestyle, medical history, health and habits of the participants. Scientists have made a link between moderate drinking and developing breast cancer. Overall, women have a 9.5% chance of getting breast cancer before they are 75. One study found that drinking every day – even a small amount – raises that risk to 10.6%.⁽³⁾

Liver cancer

Liver cancer is the eighth most frequent cancer in the world, accounting for approximately 500,000 deaths per year, worldwide.⁽⁴⁾ Alcohol is a major risk factor for liver cancer. Heavy drinking can cause cirrhosis of the liver (a condition whereby damage to the liver causes scar tissue to build up) which is the most common precursor to liver cancer.

The link between alcohol and liver cancer is stronger if you are infected with the hepatitis B or C virus. One in five people with these viruses eventually develop cirrhosis and liver cancer.⁽⁵⁾

Mouth and oesophageal (gullet) cancer

Alcohol is a leading cause of cancer of the mouth, second only to tobacco. Smoking and drinking together is thought to increase the risk.⁽⁶⁾ The same is true of oesophageal cancer. One study found that even moderate smokers and drinkers could increase their risk of developing oesophageal cancer by between 12 and 19 times.⁽⁷⁾

Bowel cancer

Research has shown that alcohol can increase the risk of bowel cancer. Recent studies have shown that even small amounts can have an effect. An ongoing study, the European Prospective Investigation of Cancer (EPIC) is collating data based on 500,000 people in 10 European countries. They have found that for every two units drunk a day, your risk of bowel cancer goes up by 8%.⁽⁸⁾

PROGRESSION

Even small amounts of alcohol can increase your risk of cancer. Drinking and smoking together additionally increases your risk of certain cancers, most notably mouth cancer.

Cutting down on the amount you drink can reduce your risk of developing several cancers. The good news is that the risk recedes quickly. For example, a study has shown that the risk of mouth and oesophageal cancers drops dramatically in heavy drinkers who stop drinking.⁽⁹⁾

If you are a smoker, stopping smoking is the single most beneficial thing you can do for your health. Ask your GP for help and advice on how to quit.

Along with cutting down on the amount you drink, your diet is a key to staying healthy. Eating plenty of fresh fruit and vegetables – at least five portions a day – can have a protective effect against cancer, especially mouth, throat, stomach and lung cancers.⁽¹⁰⁾ And according to the EPIC study, eating plenty of fibre can reduce your risk of bowel cancer.⁽¹¹⁾

According to Cancer Research UK, 30 minutes of moderate activity every day can reduce your risk of breast and bowel cancer. Brisk walking, gardening and dancing all count as moderate activity. The evidence of the protective impact of exercise is strong for these types of cancer – more than 50 studies have shown that exercise can reduce bowel cancer risk⁽¹²⁾ ⁽¹³⁾. Researchers have come up with similar findings for breast cancer.⁽¹⁴⁾

ADVICE and GETTING HELP

If you are worried about your drinking, or have any concerns about cancer, consult your GP.

CancerHelp UK – www.cancerhelp.org.uk – is the patient information website of Cancer Research UK. Their helpline operates 9am–5pm, Monday–Friday: call 020 7061 8355 or freephone 0808 800 4040.

Breast Cancer Care offers support and advice on all aspects of breast cancer. Call 0808 800 6000, or visit www.breastcancercare.org.uk.

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