

# How much is too much?

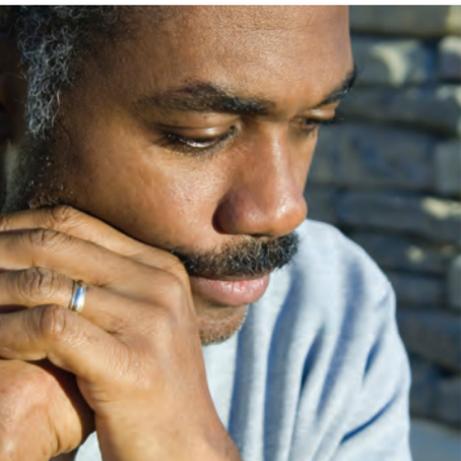
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Simple questions. Straight answers  
about the risks of alcohol and drugs.



## Why is my health care provider asking me about alcohol and other drugs?

Asking these questions is part of good quality health care, just like asking about tobacco use, diet, and exercise. It's important to be honest about how much you drink and which drugs you use. That way your health care provider can help you learn about your risk factors and can offer you the best care.



## Is it ever safe to drink alcohol?

It is safe for many people to drink alcohol in moderation. But if you have certain physical or mental health issues, take certain prescription medications, or are pregnant, alcohol and other drugs can be harmful. For example, if you or anyone in your family has had problems with alcohol and/or drugs, you may be at risk for health, legal, financial, and family problems, or addiction.

## **Do alcohol and other drugs affect women and men differently?**

Yes. Women can have stronger reactions to alcohol and other drugs. They can develop a substance use disorder faster than men and die earlier. Women who drink 1 or 2 drinks a day increase their risk of breast cancer. Pregnant women who drink any alcohol have a higher risk of having babies with birth defects, including developmental and behavior problems and physical disabilities.

## **Is it ever safe to use illegal drugs?**

Illegal drugs are never safe to use. What's in a street drug can change from use to use. This makes it very hard to know exactly what you are using and how your body might react to it. When you use illegal drugs, you may also find yourself dealing with the police and the court system.

## **Is it ever safe to use someone else's prescription medications?**

Using medicine that was prescribed for someone else or for non-medical reasons could harm your health and may lead to developing a substance use disorder and/or even an overdose.

## What are the standard drinking limits for adults?

**Healthy women:** According to the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA), drinking no more than 3 drinks on any single day and no more than 7 drinks per week means that you are likely to be at low risk for an alcohol use disorder.

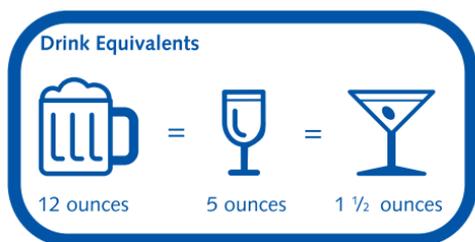
**Healthy men:** According to NIAAA, low-risk drinking is defined as no more than 4 drinks on any single day and no more than 14 drinks per week.

**All men and women aged 65 or older:** Because the way the body digests alcohol changes with age, the effects are more intense and last longer. It is important to talk to your health care provider about whether you can safely drink alcohol and how much.

Drinking above these limits is considered unhealthy. Even within these limits, you can still have problems if you drink too quickly or have other health issues. Certain people should not drink any alcohol, including those who plan to drive a vehicle or operate machinery; take medications that interact with alcohol; have a medical condition that could be made worse; are pregnant; are sexually active and not using birth control.

## What is a standard drink?

- 1 can (12 oz.) of beer or ale
- 1 glass (5 oz.) of wine
- 1 single shot (1 1/2 oz.) of hard liquor (such as vodka, tequila, whiskey, scotch, rum)
- 1 small glass (4 oz.) of sherry or liqueur



*While these are the standard measures, you may be served a different amount when you order a drink.*

## When is any alcohol too much?

- When you are a woman who is pregnant
- When you are sexually active and not using birth control
- When you are under the legal age of 21
- When you are taking certain medications that interact with alcohol
- When you have certain health risks such as uncontrolled high blood pressure, heart failure, or liver disease
- Before or while you operate a vehicle, heavy equipment, or machinery such as power saws, lawn mowers, drills, etc.
- Before or during work

### **I drink more than what's recommended. What can I do?**

Talk to your health care provider for help in making a positive change safely. Try to cut back. Drink slowly. Have something non-alcoholic, like water or seltzer, in between drinks. Have some food. Measure drinks so you know how many drinks you're having. Keep track of how much you drink. You can always ask for something else when offered a drink. If you are concerned about judgement from others for not drinking, choose an alcohol-free version of a cocktail. If this doesn't work, see the resources at the end of this booklet.

### **What are some short-term health risks of using drugs or drinking too much alcohol?**

Alcohol and other drugs can affect people differently. The effects can vary at different times. If you drink too much or use drugs, you may not be able to make good decisions. You may have unsafe sex or drive under the influence.

Drinking too much or using other drugs can cause sleep and memory problems, ulcers, depression and anxiety, heart attacks and strokes, problems with family, friends, and people at work, problems with coordination leading to accidents, overdose, and sometimes death.

## What are the legal risks of drinking too much or using other drugs?

- You could be arrested for driving under the influence of alcohol or other drugs (DUI).
- You could be arrested for illegal drug possession.
- You could lose your children if it's determined that their safety is at risk.

## What are the financial risks?

- Your job performance may suffer.
- You may miss out on raises or promotions.
- You may have problems with co-workers.
- You may injure yourself or others, or even lose your job.
- The money you use for alcohol and other drugs could pay for food, rent, or entertainment.

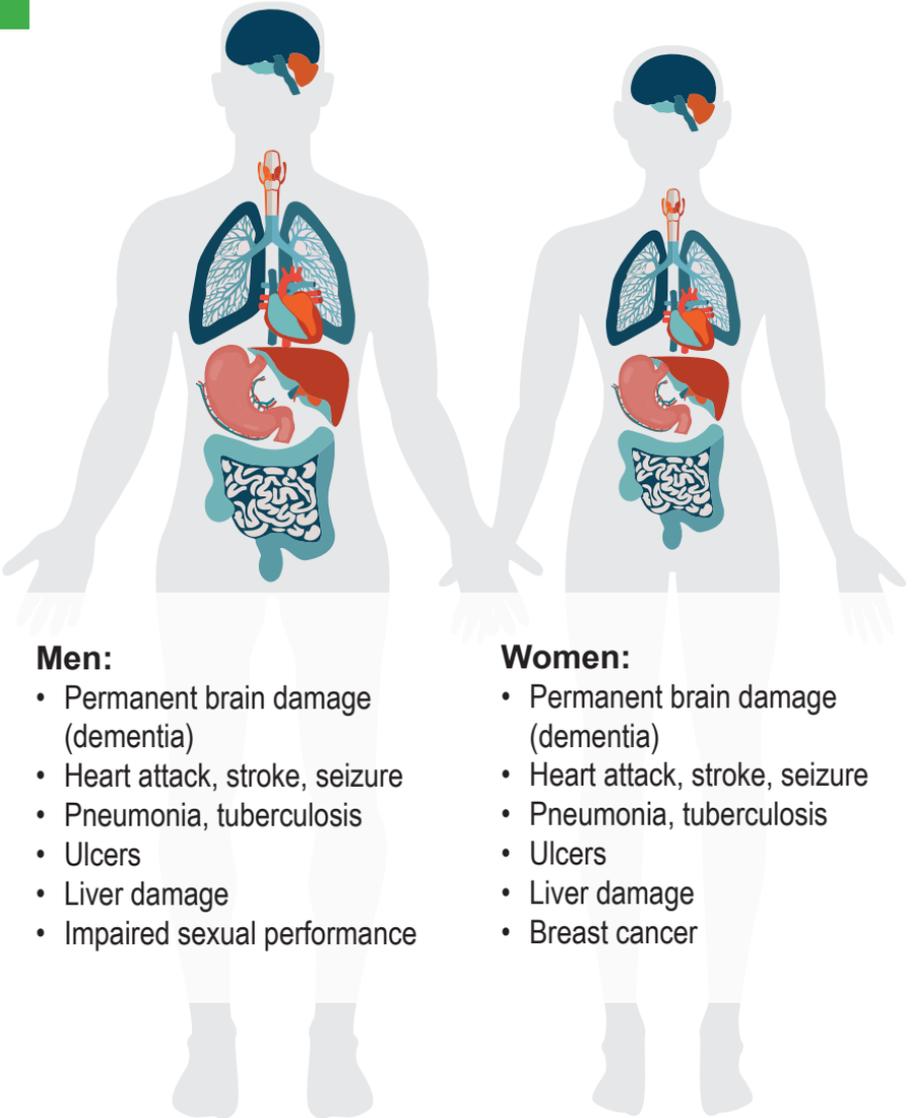
## What are the risks for my friends and family?

- You may lose some support from family and friends.
- When you drink or use drugs, your behavior may hurt or embarrass your family or friends.



# Effects of unhealthy, long-term use of alcohol and other drugs

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## Men:

- Permanent brain damage (dementia)
- Heart attack, stroke, seizure
- Pneumonia, tuberculosis
- Ulcers
- Liver damage
- Impaired sexual performance

## Women:

- Permanent brain damage (dementia)
- Heart attack, stroke, seizure
- Pneumonia, tuberculosis
- Ulcers
- Liver damage
- Breast cancer

**Other risks for men and women**

- Risk of making some medications less effective or cause a reaction
- Alcohol or drug addiction
- Risk of getting HIV/AIDS, hepatitis B or C
- Overdose and death

**Babies:**

Developmental delays or disabilities, premature birth, low birth weight

Women need to be especially careful because their bodies can be affected faster than men's. Medical studies show that women who had 1 or 2 drinks a day increased their risk of breast cancer. Women are also more likely than men to die early from the unhealthy effects of drugs and alcohol.

## Where can I go for help?

If you think you need help, talk to your health care provider. He or she can help you understand how alcohol and other drugs affect your health, and help you make changes and get support. For more information, check out the resources listed here.

### **Massachusetts Substance Use Helpline**

Toll-free: 1-800-327-5050

TTY: Use MassRelay at 711 or 1-800-720-3480

HelplineMA.org

### **Massachusetts Smokers' Helpline**

Toll-free: 1-800-QUIT-NOW or 1-800-784-8669

[www.makesmokinghistory.org](http://www.makesmokinghistory.org)

### **AA Meetings**

[www.aa.org/pages/en\\_US/find-aa-resources](http://www.aa.org/pages/en_US/find-aa-resources)

### **NA Meetings**

[www.na.org/meetingsearch](http://www.na.org/meetingsearch)

**You can find more information about alcohol and drugs for yourself or a friend from these resources:**

**Massachusetts Department of Public Health Bureau of Substance Addiction Services**

[mass.gov/dph/bsas](http://mass.gov/dph/bsas)

**Massachusetts Health Promotion Clearinghouse**

[mass.gov/MAclearinghouse](http://mass.gov/MAclearinghouse)

**Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)**

Alcohol and Public Health — [www.cdc.gov/alcohol](http://www.cdc.gov/alcohol)

Injury Prevention and Control — [www.cdc.gov/injury](http://www.cdc.gov/injury)

**National Institute on Drug Addiction (NIDA)**

[www.drugabuse.gov](http://www.drugabuse.gov)

**National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA)**

[www.niaaa.nih.gov](http://www.niaaa.nih.gov)

**Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA)**

[www.samhsa.gov](http://www.samhsa.gov)

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## Massachusetts Substance Use Helpline:

Telephone: 1-800-327-5050

TTY: Use MassRelay at 711 or 1-800-439-2370

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