



Alcohol & Cancer

A recent population-based study of 4.5 million adults found that levels of cancer risk was linked to the amount of alcohol consumed.

Researchers asked the question "How does the risk of developing cancer change after alcohol consumption is increased, stopped, or reduced?"

The study found that people who increased their consumption of alcohol (compared to those who maintained a consistent level of alcohol use), had a higher rate of alcohol-related cancer and all cancers.

In the study, individuals who changed from non-drinker to mild, moderate, or heavy drinker had an associated higher risk of alcohol-related cancer.

The good news is that people who quit drinking and maintained abstinence over time, had a lower risk of alcohol-related cancer than those who continued their same previous level of alcohol use.

The researchers concluded that alcohol cessation and reduction should be reinforced for the prevention of cancer. The study was published on August 24, 2022 in *JAMA Network Open*.

Increased Risk

Hundreds of studies over the past four decades have shown a link between alcohol use and cancer.

The medical community recognizes that consumption of alcoholic drinks is a well-established risk for alcohol-related cancers like cancer of the mouth, throat, larynx, esophagus, liver, colon, stomach, and breast. For each of these cancers, the more alcohol a person drinks, the higher the cancer risk. But for some types of cancer, most notably breast cancer, consuming even small amounts of alcohol can increase risk.

How does alcohol increase cancer risk? When alcohol is consumed, the body breaks it down into a chemical known as *acetaldehyde*.

Acetaldehyde damages DNA and prevents the body from repairing the damage. DNA is the cell's "instruction manual" that controls a cell's normal growth and function. When DNA is damaged, a cell can begin growing out of control and create a cancer tumor.

Another way alcohol increases cancer risk is by contributing to weight gain. Alcohol and other contents of mixed drinks and wine, add extra "empty" calories to the diet which results in weight gain, and being overweight is known to increase many types of cancer.

Alcohol also adversely affects levels of hormones like estrogen. Hormones act as messengers that tell cells to divide and grow. The more a cell divides, the greater the chances for something to go wrong and for cancer to develop.

It is important that people understand all of the ways that alcohol can increase the risk of getting cancer.

Communication is Key

Unfortunately, the majority of people in the U.S. are unaware of the alcohol-cancer link. In a recent survey of 3,900 Americans, only 20% were aware that wine increases cancer risk; 25% said that beer can cause cancer and 31% associated cancer risk with liquor consumption.

The American Institute for Cancer Research (AICR) has emphasized the need to increase awareness of the alcohol-cancer link. One way to spread the word is through employee education efforts within certified drug free workplace programs using monthly training newsletters like this one.

Reducing the Risk

The American Cancer Society states that alcohol use is one of the most important preventable risk factors for cancer and therefore, it is best to not drink alcohol at all.

Everyone needs to realize that each time a person drinks, the risk of cancer is increased—and just like with cigarettes and drug use, there is no “safe” amount of alcohol to consume.

But researchers, medical professionals, and substance abuse prevention specialists recognize that many Americans are not going to abstain from drinking alcohol completely. In fact, slightly more than half of Americans report drinking at some point in the previous month.

So, for people who choose to drink, it is recommended that they should limit intake to no more than 2 drinks per day for men and 1 drink per day for women. A standard 1-drink size is 12 oz. of beer, 5 oz. of wine, or 1.5 oz. of 80-proof liquor.

People often ask if one type of alcoholic drink is less harmful than another. But when it comes to cancer risk, there is no drink that is better than the others. All alcoholic beverages have ethanol in them, and it is the ethanol that is directly linked to cancer risk.

For those who want to lower alcohol intake, there are several ways to do so, including alternating alcoholic and non-alcoholic drinks, ordering smaller sizes, or keeping a few days a week alcohol free. Removing alcoholic drinks from the home is also a good strategy.



Drugs are a waste of time. They destroy your memory and your self-respect and everything that goes along with your self-esteem.

– Kurt Cobain on the futility of substance abuse

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Supervisor Newsletter

The Most Used & Abused Drug

Alcohol remains the single most used and abused drug in America.

According to the National Survey on Drug Use and Health, more than 138 million Americans are current alcohol users, over 60 million are classified as binge drinkers, and almost 18 million are classified as heavy drinkers. The National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism reports that 1 in every 13 adults in the U.S. abuse alcohol or are alcoholics, and several million more adults engage in risky drinking patterns that could lead to alcohol problems.

Of course, these statistics impact the workplace and supervisors need to be aware of all the problems caused by alcohol-abusing employees. Supervisors have a legal duty and professional responsibility to ensure that workers who report to them are alcohol-free while on the job.

A Pervasive Problem

In a survey conducted by American Addiction Centers, more than 65% of workers admitted to having used alcohol during the workday, and many employees with alcohol addictions presently drink while at work. U.S. Department of Labor and OSHA reports have both shown that at least 24% of workers report drinking on the job.

A National Council on Alcohol and Drug Dependence (NCADD) study found that workers who abuse alcohol are almost 3x more likely to get injured on the job, and emergency room statistics nationwide show that 16% of people injured at work test positive for alcohol. The NCADD study also reported that more than 10% of employees killed at work in the past year had been drinking.

In addition to workplace safety issues, alcohol abuse negatively impacts productivity and profitability. Federal government surveys have found that 20% of employees report a coworker's alcohol use having jeopardized their safety and productivity.

Alcohol Testing at Work

Because alcohol use at work causes such serious problems for businesses, employers and supervisors have an obligation and a legal right to implement policies and procedures to deal with the issue.

Implementing and maintaining a drug and alcohol-free workplace program that includes post-accident testing for alcohol, and alcohol testing when reasonable suspicion exists, is a smart business decision and a safe workplace best practice.

The U.S. Department of Transportation has approved various scientific methods of testing for alcohol, including breath testing, and legally-sound alcohol screening is one of the

best ways for supervisors to prevent alcohol use at work.

Supervisors must be aware that even though individuals suffering from alcoholism are protected from discrimination under the Americans with Disabilities Act, companies in all 50 states can still prohibit workers from being under the influence of alcohol in the workplace.

Signs & Symptoms of Alcohol Abuse

What are some of the signs and symptoms of alcohol abuse at work that might lead to a reasonable suspicion test?

- Increased absences
- Consistent tardiness
- Reduction in productivity
- Impaired decision-making
- Unpredictable behavior
- Confrontational conduct
- Increased injuries
- Lack of coordination
- Unable to complete assignments
- Hides alcohol in desk
- Comes to work hungover
- Drinks during lunch, has more than one drink
- Sleeps or is always tired at work

In addition to these unacceptable work performance issues, there are some personal and health-related problems to be on the lookout for:

- Financial difficulties
- Frequent drinking before/after work

- Legal issues due to drinking (DUI, etc.)
- Poor personal hygiene
- Smells like alcohol
- Slurs words
- Unsteady when standing, walking
- Extreme changes in weight
- Marks & discoloration on skin
- Red, bloodshot eyes
- Sunken eyes
- Flu-like symptoms
- Persistent pain
- Intestinal distress

Everyone is different and some employees' drinking habits will be more noticeable than others, but if a worker is exhibiting several of these signs of alcoholism, it is best to act fast. If these problems get worse the employee could end up injuring himself or herself or others and costing the company thousands of dollars.

When a supervisor suspects an employee of alcohol abuse at work, the supervisor should follow the company's disciplinary policies and take the appropriate action. Allowing the unacceptable behavior to continue will only enable the alcoholic's drinking and likely make the situation much worse.

Making a mandatory, supervisor referral to the company Employee Assistance Program (often available through company health insurance plans), is often what is best for the employee and the company. The goal should always be to get the employee help so that he or she can get well and return to work sober.