

Alcohol and diabetes

How can you raise your glass and keep control of the situation?

Modified with permission from the 'Healthy eating and diabetes' kit (4th edition), produced by the Diabetes Centre, The Queen Elizabeth Hospital, Adelaide, SA.

Alcohol intake recommendations

A standard drink is any drink containing 10 grams of pure alcohol. Different alcoholic drinks contain different numbers of standard drinks, as shown in the Figure and Table 1. The alcohol content (the percentage of alcohol by volume) and approximate number of standard drinks in a can, bottle or other package of an alcoholic drink are stated on the package's label.

Standard drinks are a simple and effective way of keeping track of how much alcohol is consumed. The alcohol consumption limits in the Australian guidelines to alcohol consumption are based on this concept, and are:

- for men and women, a maximum of two standard drinks a day.¹

The recommendations are the same for people with diabetes and for the general population. However, if you are trying to lose weight, your triglyceride levels are high, or you have poor glucose control or high blood pressure, try to drink alcohol on special occasions only, and limit your intake then to one or two standard drinks.

If you are finding it difficult to reduce your alcohol intake, discuss this with your doctor, diabetes nurse or dietitian.

Tips for sensible drinking are given in the box on the last page of this handout.

How can alcohol affect you?

- **Weight gain.** Alcoholic drinks are usually high in energy (calories/kilojoules), contain few vitamins or minerals and can contribute to weight gain.
- **Hypoglycaemia (low blood glucose levels).** Alcohol in large amounts, and particularly when consumed on an empty stomach, stops the liver from releasing glucose. This may cause hypoglycaemia if you take insulin or some types of diabetic medications. Always drink alcohol with a carbohydrate-based meal or snack, such as bread or fruit.
- **Raised triglyceride levels.** Alcohol can increase the levels of triglycerides (a type of bad fat) in your blood. High triglyceride levels increase your risk of heart disease. When you have raised triglyceride levels, your good (HDL) cholesterol is often too low, which is unhealthy.

This handout provides information for people with diabetes about consuming alcohol, including recommended intakes and tips for sensible drinking. The information applies also to the general population.



Figure. Standard drinks guide.

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Table 1. Alcohol contents and standard drink equivalents of some alcoholic drinks

Type of drink	Serving portion size	Standard drinks in one serve*	Typical alcohol content
Full strength beer	1 can (375 mL)	1.5	4.9%
Mid strength beer	1 can (375 mL)	1	3.3%
Light beer	1 can (375 mL)	0.7 to 0.8	2.8 to 2.9%
Diet or low joule beer	1 can (375 mL)	1 to 2	4 to 6%
Low carbohydrate beer	1 can (375 mL)	1.4 to 1.5	4.6 to 4.8%
Low alcohol beer	1 can (375 mL)	Virtually zero	0.5%
Wine, red and white	1 wine glass (160 mL)	1.5	12%
Port	1 port/sherry glass (60 mL)	1	20%
Liqueurs	1 nip (30 mL)	1 (if 40% alcohol)	7 to 55%
Spirits	1 nip (30 mL)	1	40%
Pre-mix spirits	1 bottle (300 mL)	1.2	5%

* Approximate; based on *Australian Alcohol Guidelines*, 2009.¹

Table 2. Low and higher energy alcoholic and non-alcoholic drinks

Low energy (calorie) content drinks – sensible choices

Beers – reduced alcohol (also called light), low alcohol (both of these beer types have a lower alcohol content than regular full strength beer)*

Dry wines – dry whites, dry reds, brut champagne, dry sherry

Spirits – brandy, whiskey, vodka, gin, rum, dry vermouth

Mixers – plain soda or mineral water, low joule and diet soft drinks, low joule tonic water, vegetable juice (also bitters, lemon juice)

Higher energy (calorie) drinks

Sweet wines – late harvest, dessert, Lambrusco, muscat, ‘stickies’, moselle, spätlese

Beers – full strength, mid strength, diet (diet beers, also called low joule beers, have a lower carbohydrate content than regular full strength beer but similar alcohol and energy contents)

Liqueurs – all, e.g. Galliano, Cherry Brandy, Tia Maria, Cointreau, Curaçao, Baileys

Fortified wines – port, sweet sherry

Wine coolers – e.g. Coolabah Tropical, West Coast, Tropicana

Premixed drinks – e.g. Vodka Cruiser, Bourbon and coke mixes, Bacardi Breezer

Non-alcoholic wines

* Light (low alcohol) beers are generally a better choice than diet (low carbohydrate) beers because they are lower in energy due to the lower alcohol content.



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- **Impaired judgement.** Impaired judgement can lead to less recognition of hyperglycaemia or hypoglycaemia and omission or misdosing of medications, as well as less healthy food choices.
- **Toxic effects.** Alcohol in large amounts has toxic effects on the body, such as damage to the brain, liver, gut and nerves.
- **Drug interactions.** Alcohol can interact with various medications – check with your doctor.
- **Hypertension.** Alcohol can increase blood pressure, causing hypertension.

How can the carbohydrate content of alcoholic drinks affect you?

- **Hyperglycaemia (high blood glucose levels).** Consuming large amounts of alcoholic drinks containing carbohydrate (e.g. spirits or other alcoholic drinks with non-diet soft drink mixers, premixed drinks and liqueurs) may raise blood glucose levels, causing hyperglycaemia.
- **Weight gain.** The carbohydrate and alcohol content in alcoholic drinks provides extra energy, which may contribute to weight gain.

Examples of low energy and higher energy drinks are given in Table 2.

Are there any benefits from drinking alcohol?

Some research has suggested that there may be a cardiovascular benefit from drinking moderate amounts of alcohol, particularly red wine. If you do not already drink alcohol, it is not recommended that you start for this reason.

Reference

1. NHMRC. Australian guidelines to reduce health risks from drinking alcohol. Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia; 2009.

Tips for sensible drinking

These tips apply particularly to individuals with diabetes but also to the general population.

Everyday tips

- Drink low alcohol rather than high alcohol drinks (look at the package labels for the alcohol content and approximate number of standard drinks per package).
- Eat low fat, high carbohydrate foods, such as bread, crispbread or fruit, when consuming alcohol.
- Avoid alcoholic drinks high in added sugar, such as wine coolers, alcoholic sodas, premixed drinks, sweet wines, liqueurs, port and sweet sherry. Generally beer, wine and spirits are low in carbohydrate (sugar), and in people on insulin or certain diabetic medications are more likely to cause hypoglycaemia than hyperglycaemia when consumed on their own.
- Use plain soda or mineral water, low joule and diet soft drinks, low joule tonic water as mixers.
- Talk to your friends about your diabetes and the possible risks of a 'hypo' as a result of drinking alcoholic drinks. People may mistake a hypoglycaemic episode with being drunk.

Party tips

- Count how many standard drinks you have, as the numbers add up over a long evening out.
- Skip salty foods like chips and salted nuts, which make you thirsty.
- The best drink to quench your thirst is water.
- Drink slowly from a small glass and have non-alcoholic drinks as 'spacers' between alcoholic drinks.



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