

Summary of the guidelines

Guideline 1: Adults

To reduce the risk of harm from alcohol-related disease or injury, healthy men and women should drink no more than 10 standard drinks a week and no more than 4 standard drinks on any one day.

The less you drink, the lower your risk of harm from alcohol.

This guideline applies to healthy men and women aged 18 years and over. The guideline does not represent a 'safe' or 'no-risk' drinking level, nor does it set an absolute upper limit of intake. It identifies a level of drinking at which, based on the current scientific evidence, the risk of alcohol-related harm remains low over a lifetime, in terms of both risk of death from alcohol-related disease and death from alcohol-related injury.

Key messages

- This guideline provides recommendations to reduce the risk of harm from alcohol, but these recommendations do not completely eliminate all risk from drinking alcohol.
- For both men and women, the risk of dying from alcohol-related disease and injury remains below 1 in 100 if no more than 10 standard drinks are consumed each week and no more than 4 standard drinks are consumed on any one day.
- Every drink above this level increases the lifetime risk of alcohol-related disease and injury. This includes the risk of dying from alcohol-related disease or injury.
- Drinking alcohol increases the risk of many cancers. The level of risk increases as more alcohol is consumed.
- Drinking less frequently, and drinking less on each day or drinking occasion, further reduces the lifetime risk of harm from alcohol.
- Not drinking at all is the best way to reduce the risk of harm from alcohol.
- This guideline applies to most healthy adults; however, there are some people who are at greater risk of alcohol-related harm. Those at greater risk include young adults aged 18–25 years, people aged over 60 years, people with mental or physical health conditions, people with a family history of alcohol dependence, and people who use illicit drugs or take medications that interact with alcohol.
- This guideline does not apply to children and young people under the age of 18 years (who are covered in Guideline 2), or to women who are planning a pregnancy, or are pregnant or breastfeeding (who are covered in Guideline 3).

Guideline 2: Children and people under 18 years of age

To reduce the risk of injury and other harms to health, children and people under 18 years of age should not drink alcohol.

Key messages

There is no clear 'safe' level of alcohol consumption for children and people under 18 years of age. This is because of the increased risks of harm from alcohol for young people, including from injury and potential adverse effects on brain development.

Beginning alcohol use at an early age may also put young people at greater risk of longer term alcohol-related harms, including alcohol use disorders that tend to appear in early adulthood.

To minimise these risks, children and people under 18 years of age should not drink alcohol.

Guideline 3: Women who are pregnant or breastfeeding

- A. To prevent harm from alcohol to their unborn child, women who are pregnant or planning a pregnancy should not drink alcohol.**
- B. For women who are breastfeeding, not drinking alcohol is safest for their baby.**

Key messages

This guideline is based on evidence of the harms for the developing fetus and for young babies when mothers drink alcohol while pregnant or breastfeeding. It is relevant to women who are pregnant, breastfeeding or may become pregnant in the near future.

The evidence does not indicate a safe amount of alcohol that pregnant women and breastfeeding mothers can drink.

- As there is a risk of harm to the fetus, this guideline takes a precautionary approach and recommends not drinking alcohol when pregnant.
- Similarly, as there is a risk of harm to the baby, this guideline takes a precautionary approach and recommends not drinking alcohol when breastfeeding.

During pregnancy

- Alcohol is a teratogen — that is, a substance that can cause permanent harm to a developing fetus. If a woman drinks alcohol during pregnancy, the alcohol passes freely from the mother to the fetus via the placenta, so the blood alcohol levels of the mother and fetus are similar.
- The central nervous system starts developing very early in the pregnancy, and the brain is sensitive to harms from alcohol throughout pregnancy.
- No safe level of alcohol consumption during pregnancy has been identified.
- The risk of harm to the fetus increases the more the mother drinks and the more frequently she drinks.

- Maternal and fetal factors affect the risks from drinking alcohol while pregnant (e.g. genetic differences, metabolic rates, and biochemical and inflammatory responses to alcohol). These factors make it difficult to predict the level of risk in each individual pregnancy.
- Not drinking alcohol during pregnancy, or when planning a pregnancy, prevents the risk of alcohol-related harm to the developing fetus.

When breastfeeding

- For women who are breastfeeding, not drinking alcohol is safest for their baby.
- If a breastfeeding mother drinks alcohol, that alcohol crosses into the breastmilk. Only time reduces the amount of alcohol in the milk.
- Maternal alcohol consumption may adversely affect the feeding behaviour and sleep patterns of the breastfed baby.
- A baby's brain keeps developing after it is born. A growing infant brain is more sensitive to damage from alcohol than an adult brain.

