

Strategies to Reduce the Risks and Harms of Alcohol Use

What is Unhealthy Alcohol Use? ▼

Generally, drinking less alcohol is better for your health. If you choose to drink, it's important to understand what counts as lower-risk drinking and what patterns are considered unhealthy.

Unhealthy alcohol use includes binge drinking, heavy drinking, and high-intensity drinking—all of which increase the risk of serious health and safety problems.

Below are guidelines comparing lower-risk drinking with unhealthy drinking patterns.¹

	Lower-risk Drinking Guidelines*	Unhealthy Alcohol Use
Women	No more than 1 drink/day	4+ drinks per day or 8+ per week
Men	No more than 2 drinks/day	5+ drinks per day or 15+ per week

*These guidelines apply to adults ages 18-64.

Why Reduce the Risks of Alcohol Use? ▼

At-risk or unhealthy alcohol use, whether occasionally or over time, can affect your body and mind, increase your risk of injuries and chronic diseases, lead to alcohol use disorder, and cause financial, legal, and social problems.¹

The good news is that taking steps to drink less and reduce the risks associated with alcohol use can make a big difference.²

Reducing Alcohol Use Can Help You:



Feel better and stay healthier



Lower your risk of accidents and injuries



Improve relationships with family and friends



Explore options without requiring abstinence



Support your personal goals and choices

Practical Strategies to Reduce Alcohol-related Risks

Ask yourself: *“What changes might help me feel healthier or more in control when drinking alcohol?”*



Here Are Some Ideas:

1. Eat & Hydrate

- Drink a glass of water between drinks to stay hydrated.
 - Eat before and while drinking to slow alcohol absorption.
 - Keep a balanced diet with vitamins such as thiamine (found in whole grains, beans, nuts, pork, and fortified cereals).
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2. Reduce Alcohol Use

- Alternate drinks containing alcohol with non-alcoholic ones.
 - Choose drinks with lower alcohol content—beer or wine instead of liquor.
 - Add ice or dilute drinks with water or mixers.
 - Plan alcohol-free days or days when you drink less alcohol.
 - *(If you drink heavily, talk to a healthcare professional first—stopping suddenly can cause alcohol withdrawal, which can be life-threatening.)*
 - Set limits (e.g., one drink every two hours).
 - Track your drinks using an app, journal, or simple methods such as counting bottle caps or cocktail napkins.
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3. Stay Safe

- Avoid drinking alone so someone is there to help if you drink too much.
- Plan social activities that don't involve drinking, such as sober events and groups.
- Have a friend help you track drinks.
- Never drive after drinking—leave your keys at home, use a designated driver, or rideshare.
- Avoid mixing alcohol with other drugs and medications.³



Explore [NIAAA's Rethinking Drinking](#) website for practical tools to help you track your drinking, set goals, and explore additional strategies for reducing alcohol-related risks.

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Talk to Your Healthcare Provider



If you're concerned about your drinking or considering making a change, a healthcare professional can share strategies that fit your goals.



Here Are Some Questions to Ask

- How might alcohol be affecting my health?
- What are my treatment options?
- What resources do you recommend to help reduce my risks associated with drinking?
- What support groups or counseling options are near me?
- How much alcohol is considered safer for someone like me?
- What signs should I watch for that mean I need help right away?
- What steps can I take to prevent alcohol withdrawal if I cut back?
- How can I set realistic goals for reducing my drinking?
- What should I do if I drink more than I planned?



When to Seek Immediate Help

Call your healthcare provider immediately if you experience:

- Shaking or sweating when not drinking
- Trouble sleeping without alcohol
- Difficulty controlling how much you drink

Contact emergency services if you experience a seizure or if symptoms when not drinking—such as anxiety, shaking, and/or sweating—become severe.

Bottom Line



Small steps can make a big difference. Talk with your healthcare provider about what works best for you to reduce your drinking and your risks. Help is available—explore [recovery groups](#) in your area and [SAMHSA's Treatment Locator](#) to find treatment options that work for you.

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References



1. National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA). Understanding alcohol drinking patterns. Updated February 2025. Accessed October 14, 2025. <https://www.niaaa.nih.gov/alcohols-effects-health/alcohol-drinking-patterns>
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3. CDC. Lower alcohol-related harms. Updated January 14, 2025. Accessed November 26, 2025. <https://www.cdc.gov/alcohol/about-alcohol-use/lower-alcohol-related-harms.html>