

# Alcohol Facts: Standard Drink Sizes & Guidelines

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Understanding how much you're drinking is an important step toward making healthier and safer choices. This resource explains what a standard drink is, outlines lower-risk drinking guidelines, and helps you recognize your patterns of alcohol use.



It also highlights the potential health risks and consequences of alcohol use, so you can make informed decisions.

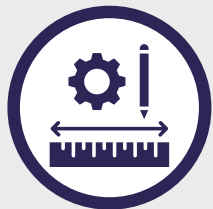
## Why Use Standard Drink Sizes?

Using standard drink sizes to calculate your alcohol intake can help you better understand your drinking patterns and risks.



Actual serving sizes and alcohol content can vary by brand and type of alcohol, so standard drink sizes are a helpful guide for following safer drinking guidelines.

*For example, beer's Alcohol by Volume (ABV) can range from less than 0.5% in non-alcoholic versions to very high levels of 10–14% or more.*



You can use standard drink sizes to estimate how many drinks you've had. *For instance, a 12-ounce beer with 10% ABV counts as two standard drinks.*







Additionally, glassware sizes can vary a lot, especially with wine glasses. Estimating your pour by sight often isn't accurate, so using a measuring cup or jigger can help you track how many standard drink sizes you're actually drinking.

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## What is a “Standard Drink”?

In the U.S., a standard drink is defined as containing 0.6 oz (14 g) of pure alcohol, which is approximately 1.2 tablespoons.

**Below are guidelines for calculating standard drinks. Although the drinks pictured below are different sizes, each contains approximately the same amount of alcohol and counts as one U.S. standard drink.<sup>1,2</sup>**

| Beer or Cooler   | Malt Liquor<br>(such as hard seltzer)  | Wine   | Distilled Spirits<br>(e.g., gin, rum, tequila, vodka, whiskey, etc.)<br>Mixed Drink or Shot   |
|--|--|--|---|
|  |  |  |           |
| 12 oz, ~5% ABV   | 8-9 oz, ~7% ABV  | 5 oz, ~12% ABV   | 1.5 oz, ~40% ABV  |
| <b>1 Standard Drink</b>  | <b>1.5 Standard Drinks</b>   | <b>1 Standard Drink</b>  | <b>1 or more *Standard Drinks</b><br><i>*Note: Depending on the recipe and type of spirit</i> |

## What is Lower-risk Drinking?

Generally, drinking less alcohol is better for your health. However, if you do choose to drink, below are the guidelines for lower-risk drinking<sup>3</sup>:

| Lower-risk Drinking*: |                           |
|-----------------------|---------------------------|
| Women                 | No more than 1 drink/day  |
| Men                   | No more than 2 drinks/day |

*\*These guidelines are based on the 2020-2025 U.S. Department of Agriculture and U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Dietary Guidelines for Americans and apply to adults ages 18–64 years.*

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## When is a Good Time to Avoid Alcohol? ▼

Some people should not drink alcohol at all.



**It's safest to avoid alcohol altogether if you are:<sup>4</sup>**

- Taking medications that interact with alcohol.
- Managing a medical condition that can be made worse by drinking (e.g., liver disease such as cirrhosis, heart failure).
- Under the age of 21.
- Recovering from alcohol use disorder (AUD) or unable to control the amount you drink.
- Pregnant or might be pregnant.
- Driving, using machinery, or doing tasks needing skill, coordination, and alertness (particularly in older adults).

## What is Unhealthy Alcohol Use? ▼

Unhealthy alcohol use includes binge drinking, heavy drinking, and high-intensity drinking. The more you drink, especially over time, the greater your risk of experiencing mental and physical health-related harms from alcohol use.<sup>4</sup>

|              | Binge Drinking  | Heavy Drinking  | High Intensity Drinking   |
|--------------|---|---|---|
|              | <i>Pattern of drinking a large amount of alcohol in a short period of time.</i> | <i>Pattern of consuming a high amount of alcohol regularly.</i> | <i>Consumption of two or more times the sex-specific thresholds for binge drinking.</i> |
| <b>Women</b> | 4+ drinks in two hours  | 4+ drinks on any day/<br>8+ drinks per week                     | 8+ drinks per day   |
| <b>Men</b>   | 5+ drinks in two hours  | 5+ drinks on any day/<br>15+ drinks per week                    | 10+ drinks per day  |

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## What Are the Harms of Unhealthy Alcohol Use?

There is a wide range of short- and long-term consequences associated with unhealthy alcohol use. For some individuals, any amount of drinking could be potentially harmful.

### Some of the common harms include:



**Health Issues:** Drinking is associated with many health problems and can make certain chronic health problems worse. Specifically, alcohol can cause liver disease, heart problems, depression, and cancer (e.g., breast, liver, colon). Additionally, people who misuse alcohol may also have difficulty managing conditions such as diabetes, high blood pressure, pain, and sleep disorders.



**Injuries & Death:** Drinking is associated with an increased risk for accidents and injuries such as drowning, falls, car crashes, assaults, and suicide.



**Unsafe Sexual Behavior:** Alcohol consumption can lower inhibitions, increasing the likelihood of engaging in riskier behaviors such as unsafe sexual activity. This can lead to sexually transmitted infections and unintended pregnancies.



**Alcohol-related Blackouts:** Drinking can cause memory gaps, or “blackouts”.



**Birth Defects:** Prenatal alcohol exposure can result in brain damage and other serious health problems in babies.



**Relationship, Legal, and Financial Problems:** Frequent alcohol use can lead to relationship problems and may also result in serious legal, financial, and professional consequences, such as DUIs, loss of a driver’s license, mounting fines, or even job loss.



**Alcohol Use Disorder (AUD):** Alcohol misuse can lead to AUD, where a person struggles to control their drinking despite negative consequences. AUD can be mild, moderate, or severe. Behavioral and pharmacologic treatments are effective and available.<sup>4</sup>

If you're concerned about your drinking, talk with your healthcare provider. Your healthcare provider can review your symptoms, discuss your pattern of drinking, and help you decide the best course of action. Help is available – explore [recovery groups](#) available in your area and [SAMHSA's Treatment Locator](#) to find treatment options that work for you.

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4. NIAAA. Understanding alcohol drinking patterns. Updated February 2025. Accessed October 14, 2025. <https://www.niaaa.nih.gov/alcohols-effects-health/alcohol-drinking-patterns>.