



# Alcohol and older people

What you need to know

**Te Whatu Ora**  
Health New Zealand



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For many of us, drinking alcohol is part of socialising and relaxing.



**But as we get older, there are things we need to know about alcohol and our health.**

Read this booklet to find out more about alcohol and ageing, including:

**1**

how our bodies become less able to cope with alcohol as we age

**2**

how alcohol affects certain medicines and health conditions

**3**

standard drinks and how much alcohol is too much when you're older

**4**

what older people can do if they think they have a drinking problem.

## As we age, we become more sensitive to alcohol's effects

Alcohol is broken down more slowly in the body as we age. So the same amount of alcohol tends to have a greater effect on older people.

If you're older and your drinking habits haven't changed, you may notice that alcohol is starting to affect you more than it did before. This is normal, but it can cause problems.

Women are usually more sensitive than men to the effects of alcohol.



Try to notice the effects that alcohol has on you.

Think about cutting down if you feel that even a small amount of alcohol is affecting you more or causing problems.

# Alcohol can cause problems if you're taking certain medicines

As we get older, many of us take more medicines, often several kinds at once.

The problem is that alcohol can make many medicines stronger or weaker, or make their side-effects worse.



If you're taking any type of medicine, always ask your pharmacist or doctor if you can safely drink alcohol.

A medicine label that says '*Not to be taken with alcohol*' means you should not drink any alcohol the whole time you're on that medicine.



**If you start a new medicine and continue drinking alcohol as you did before, watch carefully to see if you get:**

- extra sleepy
- forgetful
- confused or unfocused
- unsteady or off-balance
- dizzy or faint
- queasy or nauseous
- less interested in eating.



**One or more of these could be a sign that your medicine is being affected by alcohol.**





## What to do:



Check the labels on all your medicines to see if they're safe to use with alcohol.



Tell your pharmacist or doctor and ask for advice.



Try reducing the amount of alcohol you drink, even for just a little while, to see if it helps you feel better.



Ask your doctor to review your medicines to see if all of them are still needed, or if you can change some.

## Common types of medicines that can be affected by alcohol\* include:

- antidepressants (for depression)
- tranquillisers (for anxiety)
- sedatives (for sleeping)
- mood stabilisers  
(eg, lithium for bipolar disorder)
- antihistamines (for allergies or colds)
- anti-inflammatories (for pain and inflammation)
- paracetamol (for pain or fever)
- stronger, opiate-based painkillers (eg, codeine)
- antibiotics (for infections)
- anti-hypertensives (for high blood pressure)

\*Effects may depend on the medicine dose and amount of alcohol. Alcohol does not affect all medicines in these categories – each type of medicine needs to be checked.

This is not  
a complete  
list –  
always  
check!

- heart medicines (for angina or heart failure)
- cholesterol-lowering medicines
- indigestion medicines
- diabetes medicines
- blood thinners (for preventing blood clots)
- chemotherapy medicines  
(for cancer or severe arthritis)
- epilepsy medicines
- medicines that help urine flow  
(for men with enlarged prostates)
- some medicinal herbs, such as chamomile,  
valerian, lavender, St John's wort and kava
- some cough syrups that contain high amounts  
of alcohol and can affect other medicines.



# Alcohol can cause some health problems, and make existing problems worse

As we age we're more likely to have health problems that can be made worse by drinking. Alcohol can also cause new health problems. Problems include:

- 
- high blood sugar (diabetes)

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  - high blood pressure

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  - some cancers (eg, breast, mouth, throat, liver and bowel)

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  - memory loss (eg, dementia)

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  - liver problems

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  - stomach problems (eg, ulcers)

---

  - sleep problems – insomnia

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  - weak bones (osteoporosis)

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  - depression, anxiety and other mental health problems

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  - incontinence (wetting or soiling yourself).
- 

Some health conditions can also be harder to diagnose or treat if people drink alcohol.



Talk with your doctor or another health professional about how alcohol may be affecting your health, especially if you have any of the health problems mentioned on the previous page.

## Alcohol and injury



Drinking alcohol can increase people's chances of being injured, such as from falls and motor vehicle crashes.



If older people have mobility difficulties or other disabilities, drinking can further add to their chances of falling.

## Some facts about alcohol and ageing



In New Zealand most older people drink alcohol, with men more likely to drink than women.



Older New Zealand Europeans are more likely than older Māori and Pacific adults to drink alcohol.



Many older people drink alcohol daily or regularly, but usually in smaller amounts than younger people.



Some older people drink at levels that can lead to physical, psychological or social harm, including health problems and injuries.





# Many of us cut down on alcohol as we get older, but some of us drink more

People tend to drink less as they get older or stop drinking altogether. Common reasons are because of their health and the increased effects of alcohol.

Some people continue to drink heavily and others drink more alcohol than they used to, sometimes at harmful levels. Reasons for this include:

- 
- habits of drinking developed over a lifetime
- 
- coping with loneliness, isolation, bereavement,
  - relationship problems, anxiety, depression, insomnia, regrets or change
- 
- loss of a partner, routine, status, friends, ability, memory, respect or social life
- 
- more opportunities for drinking and socialising,
  - such as more free time or changes in living circumstances and finances
- 
- relief from boredom, trauma or pain.
- 



It's never too late, however, to cut down or stop drinking alcohol.

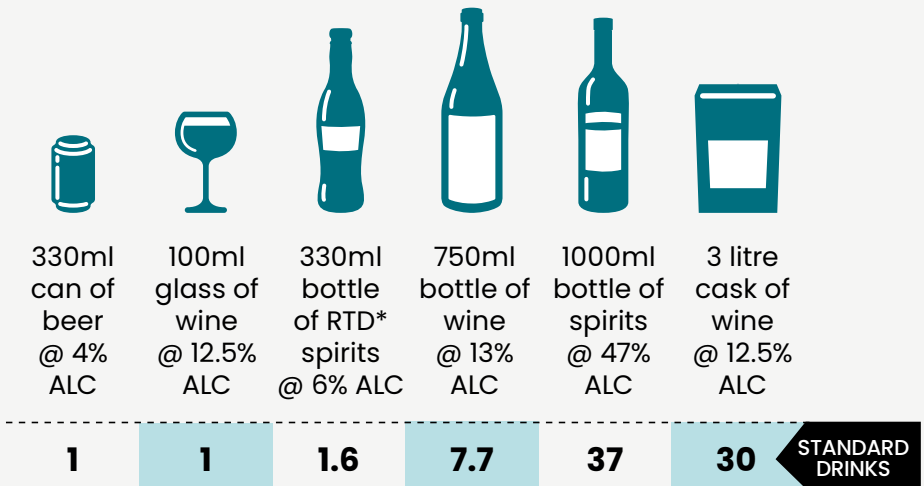
# How do I know how much alcohol I'm drinking?

## What's a standard drink?

Drinks are sometimes stronger than we think. It's useful to know how much alcohol we're drinking.

The standard drinks measure is a simple way to work out how much alcohol we're having. One standard drink equals 10 grams of pure alcohol.

The picture below shows how many standard drinks there are in different kinds of alcohol.



\*RTD (Ready-to-drink)

All bottles of wine, beer, cider and spirits and all cans and casks are required to have standard drinks content on the labels. Look out for wording about standard drinks or for the standard drinks image below.



The number inside the image tells you approximately how many standard drinks are in that bottle, can or cask.



When you pour an alcoholic drink at home, you're probably pouring different amounts every time. By checking the standard drinks label you'll have a good idea of how many drinks you are serving out of each bottle, can or cask.



# What's too much for an older adult to drink?

Many of us will need to cut down our drinking when we get older. Some of us will need to stop drinking altogether. There are no set rules for older people because everyone's different.

This is because of the factors already mentioned:

- our increasing sensitivity to alcohol
- the medicines we're taking
- our health conditions and disabilities.

Remember, it's a good idea to notice the effect that alcohol has on you. We all have to become experts on our own drinking!



Try to get a clear understanding about the effect that alcohol is having on you by cutting down for a while, for example two weeks or a month.

Think about changes you've noticed. Maybe check out what you've noticed about yourself with other people close to you.

## Daily and weekly alcohol drinking advice

You may have seen the **low-risk alcohol drinking advice** from Te Whatu Ora – Health New Zealand (next page).

This drinking advice lets you know the maximum number of standard drinks that healthy adult men and women can have in one day and over one week to reduce their long-term health risks from drinking alcohol.



**We need to be careful using these guidelines because they are likely to be too high for us as we get older.**

You may find that you are more comfortable drinking much less than the advised maximum number of drinks for adults. Or you may choose to drink no alcohol at all.

Likewise, if you have health problems that can be made worse by drinking alcohol, or take medications that can be affected by alcohol, you will probably need to drink less or not at all.

Ask your doctor, pharmacist or another health professional for advice specific to you.

## Low-risk alcohol drinking advice for adults



### For healthy women:



no more than two standard drinks a day



no more than 10 standard drinks a week



at least two alcohol-free days per week



### For healthy men:



no more than three standard drinks a day



no more than 15 standard drinks a week



at least two alcohol-free days per week

Note: This is the advice to reduce long-term health risks. Low risk is not, however, no risk. Even when you drink within the low-risk limits, a range of factors can affect the level of risk, including the rate of drinking, body type and genetic makeup, gender, age, and existing health problems and associated medication use.

## When not to drink alcohol

You should **not** drink alcohol if you're about to:

**X**

operate machinery

**X**

drive a vehicle  
(including a mobility scooter)

**X**

do anything that is risky  
or requires skill.

You should also **not** drink alcohol if you feel:

**X**

unwell

**X**

depressed

**X**

tired

**X**

cold

as it could make things worse.





# It's never too late to cut back or stop drinking alcohol

Making a change in our drinking habits can be hard. Some older people may need to cut back their drinking. Others may need to stop drinking altogether.

Here are some ideas that could help:

1

Set yourself a limit and stick to it.

2

Drink alcohol only with food (food helps the body to deal with alcohol).

3

Alternate between non-alcoholic and alcoholic drinks.

4

Try having a warm drink, rather than an alcoholic one, to help you sleep.

5

If you're drinking to help with one of the difficulties mentioned earlier (eg, loss, pain, boredom), speak to your doctor or another health professional for advice on how to cope or make changes in your life.



6

Ask your family/whānau and friends to support you too. Spending time with people you enjoy can help.

7

If you're a very heavy drinker and want to stop drinking, make sure you talk to your doctor first. They will make sure that you have the right medical support to do this safely.



**If you don't make the changes you want the first time, try again. Get the help you need.**

## Who can help

It isn't always easy for people to ask questions about alcohol or say they have a drinking problem. Some people may feel embarrassed or ashamed about their drinking, but it's better to ask for help than try to cope alone.

If you're having trouble stopping or cutting back on how much alcohol you drink, talk to your doctor or another health professional. Your doctor can refer you to an alcohol treatment service or to another health or social service you may need to help you. Some treatment services cater just for older people.



You can also call the **Alcohol Drug Helpline for free on 0800 787 797.**

If you like, you can use the service's  
**Māori line – 0800 787 798**  
**Pasifika line – 0800 787 799.**

The Alcohol Drug Helpline provides free and confidential information and self-help material, advice and referrals to local alcohol treatment services.

Information about getting help with your drinking can also be found on the internet.



**For further information, visit:**

- > [alcoholdrughelp.org.nz](http://alcoholdrughelp.org.nz)
- > [alcohol.org.nz](http://alcohol.org.nz)

If you don't have access to the internet and you want more written information about alcohol, you can contact **Te Whatu Ora** for free on Freephone 0508 258 258.



# What family/whānau and friends can do

Kind listening and practical support can help a person who wants to make healthier choices around alcohol.

If you're caring for or supporting an older adult, make sure they have a copy of this booklet. Encourage them to read it to find out how alcohol could be affecting them.

If they want to talk about their alcohol use, listen carefully to what they say. Be respectful of their ideas and decisions. Remember, they're adults and have the right to choose what to do.

If you feel you can, offer to help. Talk together about practical things you could do, such as:

- 
- finding more information on how much alcohol is safe for them to drink

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  - making more or better non-alcoholic drinks available for them

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  - looking at their medicines' labels to see what they say about alcohol

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  - checking if their health conditions could make drinking a problem.

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- 
- doing things to help them reduce loneliness, worry or boredom (eg, taking them to see friends)
- 
- going with them on visits to a doctor, pharmacist or other health professional for further information
- 
- contacting the **Alcohol Drug Helpline**
- – **0800 787 797** on their behalf and with their agreement.
- 

Sometimes, caring for or supporting a person who has a drinking problem can be stressful. It's important to look after yourself, too. Discussing your concerns with someone outside the situation may be useful. The **Alcohol Drug Helpline – 0800 787 797** can help.







The images in this booklet feature models and are used for illustrative purposes only.

**Te Whatu Ora/  
Health New Zealand**

Call: 04 917 0060

Email: [enquiries@hpa.org.nz](mailto:enquiries@hpa.org.nz)

For help contact the  
Alcohol Drug Helpline on **0800 787 797**