

Alcohol facts and effects infosheet

What happens when I drink alcohol?

At a glance

- Alcohol is a drug and can affect the body in many ways.
- Once swallowed, alcohol is rapidly absorbed into the blood and moves to all parts of the body, including to an unborn baby.
- The liver breaks down most of the alcohol at an average rate of one standard drink per hour.
- A small amount of alcohol leaves the body through the skin, in the breath and in urine.
- The amount of alcohol in the blood at any time varies depending on the amount, the strength and how quickly the alcohol is consumed. Individual factors also contribute, such as body type, age, gender, and how well the liver can break down alcohol to use for energy.

How does alcohol get into my blood?

1. In my mouth

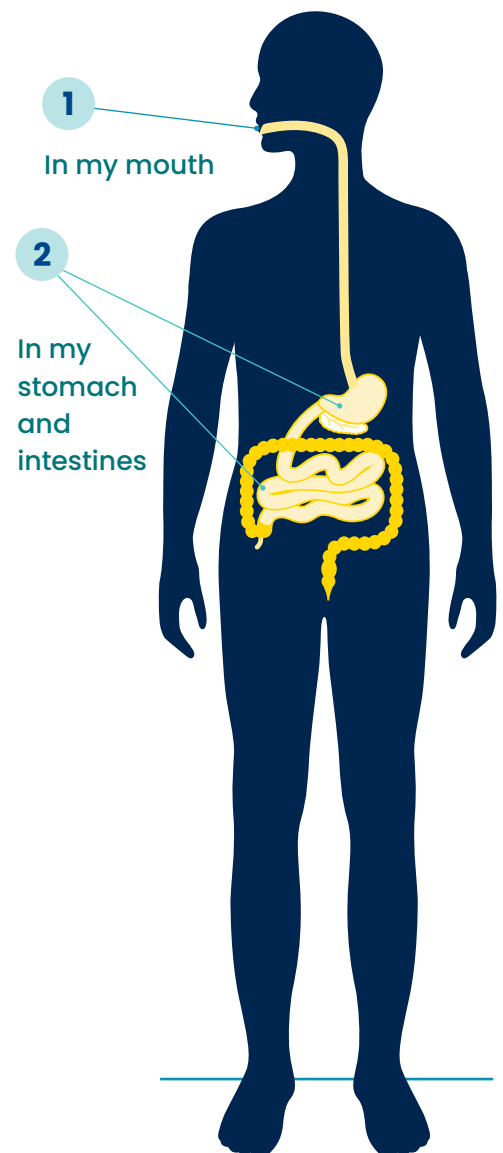
A small amount of alcohol immediately moves into the small blood vessels in the mouth and the tongue.

2. In my stomach and intestines

Up to 20% of alcohol passes through the stomach into the blood. If the stomach is empty, alcohol moves quickly down into the intestines.

If there is food in the stomach, alcohol stays in the stomach longer so more is absorbed through the stomach. An enzyme in the stomach also has time to break down some alcohol before most of the alcohol moves down into the intestines.

The remaining 75% to 85% of alcohol is absorbed through the small intestine into the blood.



What happens to the alcohol in my blood?

1. In my blood and circulation

Alcohol is very quickly moved around the body in the blood stream to all parts of the body. Alcohol stays circulating in the blood until the liver is able to break it down.

2. In my liver

The liver filters the blood and breaks down 80% to 90% of the alcohol (with the help of enzymes) to water, carbon dioxide and products the body uses for energy (calories/kilojoules). The liver can only break down alcohol at an average rate of one standard drink per hour.

3. In my kidneys and urine

The kidneys filter blood, balance the amount of fluid in the body and remove wastes (into urine). Alcohol makes the kidneys work harder and they produce more urine. Up to 10% of alcohol leaves the body in the urine.

4. Whole of my body

Very high levels of alcohol in the body can lead to slowed breathing, loss of consciousness and death.

5. In my brain and nervous system

Alcohol in the blood quickly moves to the brain. Effects can be felt within five to ten minutes after drinking. They can include mood changes and impaired ability to think, coordinate movement and lay down memories (blackouts).

6. In my lungs

Some alcohol is evaporated from the blood through the lungs into the breath. Up to 8% of alcohol is breathed out. This is the alcohol that a breathalyser measures.

7. In my skin

A small amount of alcohol evaporates from the fine blood vessels just under the skin. Alcohol can also be absorbed through the skin.

8. In my unborn baby

Alcohol passes back and forth through the placenta from the blood of the mother into the unborn baby. The baby is exposed to the same blood alcohol levels but can't break it down like the mother can. Drinking alcohol at any stage of pregnancy can affect the development of the baby and have life-long effects.

