

Fact Sheet:

Alcohol

Most people can enjoy alcohol in moderation. But drinking too much alcohol can be harmful to your health.

If you choose to drink alcohol, it should be on your terms. When you have diabetes, there are some extra things to consider when you drink alcohol. Alcohol can affect your judgement when looking after your diabetes. It can also have many different effects on your body, including:

Weight gain. Alcohol has very little nutritional value and is high in energy, or kilojoules/calories. If you drink alcohol in large amounts, or on a regular basis, it can lead to weight gain.

Increasing risk of hyperglycemia. Different types of alcohol contains different amounts of carbohydrates (carbs). So, drinking can cause hyperglycaemia, or high blood glucose level.

Increasing risk of hypoglycaemia. Alcohol-related hypoglycaemia (also known as hypo or low blood glucose level) can occur while drinking and for many hours afterwards.

Damage to the body. Drinking large amounts of alcohol can be extremely dangerous – even for people without diabetes. It can affect many different parts of your body, including your brain, nerves, liver, and pancreas. Too much alcohol can also increase your risk of developing heart disease and some cancers.

Risk of diabetes-related complications. Too much alcohol can increase the risk of developing diabetes-related complications. This is because alcohol can increase weight and triglycerides (blood fats) and raise blood pressure.



Alcohol and hypos

If you drink alcohol, you are at risk of alcohol-related hypos. A hypo is when blood glucose levels drop below 4 mmol/L. Hypos can occur while drinking alcohol or in the hours afterwards when you have gone to bed.

The liver releases stored glucose if your blood glucose level drops too low. When you drink alcohol, this is interrupted. This can increase the risk of a hypo. Alcohol can also make it harder for you to recognise the symptoms of, and to treat, a hypo.

When drinking alcohol, it is important that your



friends and family understand the difference between having a hypo and being tipsy or drunk.

Ask your doctor or diabetes health professional whether you might be at increased risk of alcohol-related hypos.

How much alcohol is safe?

There is no 'safe way' to use alcohol. To reduce the risk of alcohol-related harm, current guidelines are for people over 18 years to limit alcohol to no more than 10 standard drinks per week and no more than 4 standard drinks on any one day. This recommendation is the same for people with or without diabetes.

You may be advised to drink less – or not at all – if you:

- are above the healthy weight range
- have trouble managing your blood glucose levels
- have high blood pressure or triglycerides
- have diabetes-related complications.

If you have other health conditions that are made worse by drinking alcohol, such as liver disease or pancreatitis, you may also be advised not to drink. Women who

are pregnant, planning a pregnancy or breastfeeding should not drink alcohol.

Alcohol is not recommended for people under the age of 18 as it can affect brain development and function. It is also illegal for anyone under the age of 18 years to drink alcohol.

Some medications can react with alcohol. If you are taking any medications, ask your doctor or pharmacist whether you can drink alcohol when taking these.

What is a standard drink?

A standard drink contains 10 grams (g) of alcohol. It is important to know what a standard drink is for different types of alcohol so you can monitor your intake.

One standard drink is:

- 285 ml of regular beer
- 375 ml of mid-strength beer
- 425 ml of low-alcohol beer (less than 3% alcohol)
- 60 ml of fortified wine
- 100 ml of wine or sparkling wine
- 30 ml of spirits.

It is easy to overestimate the size of a standard

Standard drinks





drink, so it is a good idea to:

- check the number of standard drinks on the label of the bottle/can
- measure out a standard drink into a glass, so you know what it looks like
- be aware that many wine glasses can hold two or more standard drinks.

Which alcoholic drinks should I choose?

It is generally best to avoid very sweet drinks, such as regular soft drink mixers, sweet liqueurs and pre-mixed alcoholic beverages. Choose wine, low-alcohol beers or spirits with diet mixers or plain mineral or soda water.

Low-carb beer is still high in energy and alcohol content so may not be a better choice than regular beer.

Reduce your risk of hypos

- Talk to your doctor or diabetes health professional about whether you might be at risk of alcohol-related hypos and if so, how to reduce your risk.
- Avoid drinking large amounts of alcohol. Do not drink alcohol on an empty stomach. Make sure you have a meal containing carb foods such as rice, potato, pasta or bread before drinking alcohol, or snacks that contain carb while drinking.
- If there are no carb foods available, use a standard (non-diet) soft drink or fruit juice if you are having mixed drinks. If you are eating carb foods while drinking, use a diet soft drink, plain mineral or plain soda water as a mixer.
- Talk to your doctor or diabetes health professional about whether to check your blood glucose levels when you drink alcohol. They may recommend checking your blood glucose levels more often. This might include checking before bed and again overnight, if possible.

- Always carry some hypo treatment, such as jellybeans or glucose tablets.
- When drinking alcohol, make sure you have someone with you who knows you have diabetes and who understands the symptoms and how to treat a hypo if needed.
- Always wear some form of diabetes identification. Otherwise, people may mistake your hypo symptoms for the effects of excessive alcohol, and you may not get the help you need.
- Ask your diabetes health professional for information on drinking when taking insulin.
- Eat a snack containing carbs before you go to bed.
- Ask someone to wake you up in the morning to check that you are ok. If you monitor your blood glucose levels, check them when you get up and then eat breakfast as soon as you can.
- Avoid drinking alcohol during and after vigorous exercise or extended periods of strenuous activity such as dancing or bushwalking. Discuss this with your diabetes health professionals.

How to drink less alcohol

- Drink some water before drinking any alcohol, so that you are not thirsty.
- Choose low-alcohol (not low-carb) beer or wine.
- Sip alcoholic drinks slowly.
- Alternate your alcoholic drinks with non-alcoholic drinks such as water or mineral or soda water.
- Dilute alcoholic drinks with non-alcoholic mixers to reduce the alcohol content. For example, mix beer with diet lemonade to make a shandy or mix soda water with wine.
- Make sure you have regular alcohol-free days.

