

Tip Sheet:

Drinking Alcohol During Cancer Treatment

- A cancer diagnosis can make people worried, anxious, and sad. Some patients may want to use alcohol to cope or to relieve physical pain related to their illness.
- However, consuming alcohol can interfere with some cancer treatments and cause unwanted side effects. Drinking can also put a strain on important relationships with your family, friends, and caregivers.
- Alcohol use can harm your overall health.

Tell your care team

We encourage you to talk honestly about your alcohol use with your Dana-Farber care team, and do it as soon as possible. If drinking is, or has been, a problem in your life, this may be hard to talk about. But your team needs to know so they can give you the best possible care.

Know what moderate drinking means

Doctors advise people who use alcohol to drink in moderation. According to U.S. dietary guidelines, moderate drinking means **no more than one (1) drink per day for women** and **no more than two (2) drinks per day for men**.

Women concerned about breast-cancer risk may want to limit their drinking even more, because alcohol raises blood levels of estrogen, a sex hormone linked to breast cancer.

Learn: Is it safe to drink during cancer treatment?

Whether it is safe to drink moderate alcohol while being treated for cancer depends on your particular cancer, your treatment, and your overall health situation.

For example, alcohol may:

- **Interfere with the way some chemotherapy drugs work.**
- **Raise the risk of side effects from treatment** by dehydrating you or causing a loss of nutrients.
- **Irritate mouth sores** from some chemotherapy and radiation treatments. Sores inside the mouth, throat, and digestive tract can cause pain and infections and make it harder to eat, drink, and swallow.
- **Cause nerve damage and worsen symptoms of peripheral neuropathy**, a condition that can result from chemotherapy. It can be felt as pain, numbness, or tingling in the fingers and feet.

It may be safe to have an occasional drink while undergoing treatment, but you should first talk with your Dana-Farber care team. Doctors may differ in their recommendations on alcohol use.

Alcohol and your health

Over time, **heavy** drinking can lead to serious health problems, such as high blood pressure, heart damage, liver disease, digestive issues, and a weakened immune system. Alcohol can also be addictive for some people. On the other hand, research suggests that **moderate** drinking may help lower the risk of heart disease.

- **Alcohol use raises your cancer risk:** There is strong evidence that alcohol raises the risk of several types of cancer, so drinking during or after treatment could affect your future health. Alcohol use is a major risk factor for head and neck cancers, especially cancers of the mouth, pharynx (throat), and larynx (voice box). It is also linked to cancers of the esophagus, liver, breast, and colon and rectum, and possibly other cancers such as pancreatic and stomach.
- **The more alcohol you consume,** the higher your cancer risk. According to research, the type of alcohol (wine, beer, etc.) doesn't seem to matter. On the flip side, research also shows that drinking less reduces your chance of developing cancer.
- **Tobacco use further increases cancer risk:** People who use **both** alcohol and tobacco are more likely to develop cancer than people who use either one alone.
- **Recurrence link is unclear:** Whether drinking alcohol after cancer treatment increases the chance of your cancer coming back (recurrence) is not known. We encourage you to discuss this with your cancer care team.

For more information

To access the internet during your visits to Dana-Farber, consider using one of the free computer workstations in the Blum Patient and Family Resource Center, or borrow an iPad from the Shapiro Center for Patients and Families. Both centers are on the first floor of the Yawkey Center.

This document is for informational purposes only. The content is not intended as a substitute for professional medical advice, diagnosis, or treatment. Always seek the advice of your physician or other qualified health provider with any questions you may have regarding a medical condition.