

Alcohol & cancer treatments

Why does my cancer team ask questions about my alcohol use?

Alcohol affects the kidneys and liver, and so do some cancer treatments.

Knowing how much you are drinking can help the team keep your comfort in mind and plan ahead so that your treatment can work best.

How will drinking alcohol affect me while I am getting cancer treatments?

Some treatments have side effects (for example, nausea, diarrhea, vomiting, fatigue, brain fog, confusion, sore mouth) that can be worse if you are drinking alcohol.

Alcohol can cause dehydration (sounds like dee-hi-dray-shun) – when your body does not have enough water; this **may make nausea and vomiting worse**.

Chemotherapy and drinking may stress the kidneys and liver. If these organs become too stressed, your chemotherapy may need to be delayed.

How do I cut back or stop my drinking?

It is best to avoid alcohol if you can, especially when you first start a new treatment.

If you can't avoid drinking alcohol, try to cut back as much as you can:

- Choose a lower alcohol content drink (for example, from whiskey to beer, or vodka to ciders)
- Try an alcohol-free or minimal-alcohol beer, wine, or mocktail
- Try making every other drink a non-alcoholic one (a glass of wine, then water or mocktail/pop)
- Have a plan for the timing of your treatments and medicine and when you drink

How can I get more help with coping with cancer?

Having cancer is hard and stressful. You are trying to cope with your cancer and drinking may be one way you use to cope.

You can talk to the health care team about your alcohol use. **It is good to ask for help at anytime.**

Your health care team is here to support your emotional well being as well as your physical health.

You can also visit our website, www.bccancer.bc.ca and type in 'coping' to get a list of programs and tips to help you. The website includes information on anger, loss and grief, managing stress, sadness and depression, and being worried, scared or anxious.

Patient and Family Counselling is here to help people with cancer and their families. **Patient and Family Counselling is available at each BC Cancer centre.** You can call them directly, or ask your cancer team to make a referral for you.



What are some other ways to cope if I have cancer?

Make a list of fun things you like to do. For example: yoga, go for a walk, play with a pet or with children, talk to a friend, watch a funny movie. Refer to that list when you need ideas.

Embrace community activities, this could include recovery spaces, such as 'Smart Recovery' and 'Alcoholics Anonymous', to be around other people, if that helps.

BC Cancer offers many support programs, some in person, some online. Topics range from art therapy to tumour specific support groups, and are changing monthly: www.bccancer.bc.ca/our-services/services/support-programs

In addition, these agencies offer supports:

- **Wellspring:**
<https://wellspring.ca/programs/>
Toll Free: 1.877.499.9904
- **Inspire Health:**
<https://inspirehealth.ca/programs-services/>
Toll Free: 1.888.734.7125
- **Crisis Line:** **1.800.784.2433**

Did alcohol cause my cancer?

Alcohol can raise the risk of cancer, but one risk alone does not cause cancers. It is a **complex** process, that is different for every person. Environment, genetics, and exposure to radiation or viruses, can also play a role. Some people who drink never get cancer, and others who drink do get cancer. People of all ages and lifestyles get cancer.

What you should know:

If you have been drinking regularly, talk to your doctor about stopping. **Don't stop on your own, as there is a risk for seizures/other medical problems** (depending on how much you drink).

If you stop drinking during cancer treatment, talk to your doctor about when it is safe to drink again.

Where can I learn more?

Talk to your health care team, who can link you to other supports and resources. You can also reach out to groups yourself:

- **HelpStartsHere:**
<https://helpstartshere.gov.bc.ca/>
Toll Free: 1.800.663.1441
Free, confidential service for people throughout BC needing help with any kind of substance use concern
- **Helpwith Drinking:**
<https://helpwithdrinking.ca/>
Includes resources for you and your family
- **Indigenous specific resource – KUU-US Crisis Line:**
www.kuu-uscrisisline.com/
Toll Free: 1.800.588.8717
Culturally safe help for First Nations and Indigenous people in BC on topics related to mental health and substance use
- **BC Cancer:** www.bccancer.bc.ca/prevention/alcohol/reduce-your-risk of cancer



At BC Cancer, we are here to provide you with the best possible health care, without judgment.