Drink less alcohol, cut your cancer risk
There is no doubt that drinking alcohol increases the risk of cancer. Alcohol causes at least 9,000 cancer deaths in the UK each year and is linked to seven different types of cancer.

The more alcohol you drink, the higher your cancer risk.

In this leaflet you can find out about:
- what the research tells us about the link between alcohol and cancer
- how to limit your cancer risk from alcohol
- how many units of alcohol are in common drinks.
How does alcohol cause cancer?

Alcohol damages your cells
In the body, alcohol is changed into a chemical called acetaldehyde. This chemical causes hangovers, and it damages nearby cells, which can cause cancer to develop. Drinking alcohol increases the risk of cancer in parts of the body it passes through including the mouth, throat and bowel.

Alcohol also causes cancer that starts in the liver. It can damage liver cells causing a disease called cirrhosis. This is a major cause of liver cancer.

Alcohol changes hormone levels in your body
Alcohol can alter levels of some hormones in the body, including oestrogen, testosterone and insulin. This may be why alcohol increases the risk of cancers such as breast cancer, which are linked to high levels of hormones.

Alcohol worsens the dangers of smoking
Research has found that people who smoke and drink have up to 50 times the risk of some cancers compared to people who neither smoke nor drink.

Drinking alcohol can contribute to weight gain
Alcoholic drinks tend to be high in calories, so can make you more likely to put on weight. Being overweight increases your risk of cancer of the kidney, bowel, gallbladder, gullet (oesophagus), pancreas and cancers of the breast and womb in women.
Alcohol and cancer in the headlines

Are some types of alcohol, like red wine, good for my health?
You may have read in the paper that some types of alcohol can protect against cancer or heart disease. All alcoholic drinks – beer, wine and spirits – increase the risk of cancer. No type of alcohol is any better or worse than another.

But in men over 40 and women who have been through the menopause, regularly drinking small amounts of alcohol probably protects against coronary heart disease.

Alcohol only protects against heart disease when small amounts of alcohol are drunk. Drinking more heavily increases the risk of both heart disease and cancer.

Is binge-drinking the real problem?
Research tells us that the total amount of alcohol you drink over time has a much bigger effect on cancer risk than when or how it is drunk. Drinking a lot of alcohol will increase your risk of cancer if you save it up and drink it in one go, or if you drink it steadily over a week.
How much can I drink safely?

Alcohol has a stronger effect on your risk of developing some types of cancer than others. Studies tell us that drinking small amounts of alcohol might have little effect on your risk of liver cancer, but a strong effect on mouth cancer risk. This makes it very difficult to recommend a single ‘safe’ level of drinking.

The common result in all studies of alcohol and cancer is that the more you drink, the greater your chance of developing cancer.

The best advice for anybody who drinks regularly is that the more you can cut down on alcohol, the more you reduce your cancer risk.

There is limited risk if you only drink a little – such as one small drink a day for women or two small drinks a day for men – but the risk increases the more you drink.
How many units are really in your drinks?

Units tell us how much alcohol is in a drink.

Over recent years, alcoholic drinks have become bigger and stronger. One drink often contains as many as two or three units of alcohol.

In most pubs, bars and restaurants a small glass of wine is 175 ml, while a large glass is 250 ml. Around half of pubs now serve spirits in 35 ml measures rather than the traditional 25 ml.

Alcoholic drinks have also been getting stronger. The average strength of wine is 12.5%, while lagers, ciders and beers are often stronger than 5%.
Below you can find out how many units there are in some common drinks.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Drink Description</th>
<th>Units</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A pint of premium strength (5–5.5%) lager, cider or extra strength bitter</td>
<td>3 units</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A large 2 x 35 ml double measure of spirits (40%)</td>
<td>3 units (just under)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A large 250 ml glass of wine (12%)</td>
<td>3 units</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A 175 ml glass of wine (12%)</td>
<td>2 units</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A pint of ordinary strength (3–4%) lager, cider or best bitter</td>
<td>2 units</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A 275 ml bottle of alcopop (5%)</td>
<td>1.5 units (just under)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A small 25 ml single measure of spirits (40%)</td>
<td>1 unit</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Further information

About cutting down on alcohol
If you are concerned about how much you, a family member or friend drinks, please call:
- Drinkline, on 0800 917 82 82 (Freephone)
- Alcoholics Anonymous, on 0845 769 7555.

About alcohol and cancer
For more about alcohol and the science behind our messages visit www.cancerresearchuk.org/health

About cancer
For information about living with cancer visit www.cancerhelp.org.uk

If you want to talk in confidence about cancer, call our information nurses on freephone 0808 8004040.

Order more leaflets
You can order our full range of leaflets free online at www.cancerresearchuk.org/leaflets

Support Cancer Research UK
If you would like to support our work please call 020 7121 6699 or visit www.cancerresearchuk.org

Together we will beat cancer