

Title: Research about alcohol's effects on our health is clearer than ever

Historically, the number of Americans who report drinking alcohol is at its lowest rate in decades.¹ We're learning more and more that lower alcohol consumption is beneficial for our society and health. While we used to tout the benefits of socialization through a glass of wine, the last few decades of research funded by the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA) continues to reveal the widespread impact of alcohol on our health.

"Alcohol misuse is linked to over 200 diseases and injuries. As most of us see people drinking alcohol every day, we don't recognize how potentially damaging it can be", says *Kristen G. Anderson, President of the Research Society on Alcohol*.

But why are there conflicting messages about alcohol's impact on health?

Determining the amount of alcohol that will result in harmful health effects is challenging because many factors, such as sex, age, genetics, and other health conditions, may play a role in the damaging effects of alcohol. Many years ago, a report suggested that moderate drinking may reduce our risk of death and cardiovascular issues; however, these findings have been called into question² and many studies since then have not supported the idea that drinking has significant health benefits. This is why continued investment in research is so important. Scientifically rigorous research related to the impact of alcohol consumption on our physical and mental health is critical for providing Americans clear guidance so they can make informed decisions.

When is too much alcohol, too much?

Prior recommendations have limited alcohol consumption to one or less drinks per day for women and two or less for men (due to metabolism and other sex differences). However, the newly published U.S. Dietary Guidelines aren't giving us a clear direction, removing the specific drink per day recommendations and instead suggesting to "limit alcohol consumption."

With regard to these new dietary guidelines, Dr. Anderson notes "As a society, we do not fully recognize the potential harms associated with alcohol consumption. The dietary guidelines provide an important avenue to educate the public about how what we eat and drink affects health. By ignoring what science tells us about alcohol and how it relates to disease, it is impossible for people to make informed choices for their health."

Indeed, the lack of guidance is concerning, considering a recent report showing an increase in cancers related to alcohol,³ in addition to a long list of physical and mental health risks. Studies have established that any amount of alcohol increases risk for negative health outcomes. The link between even low levels of alcohol use and cancer is particularly strong regarding breast cancer in women.⁴ And heavier drinking has been consistently linked to serious health consequences.⁵ For people who decide to drink, limiting oneself to one drink (for women) or two drinks (for men) on a drinking day can minimize those risks. So can taking a few days off from drinking each week. Less drinking means lower health risk.

We also know that alcohol use affects certain populations differently, something the Dietary Guidelines recognize. The new Dietary Guidelines discourage pregnant women from consuming alcohol. Thanks to research, we know the adverse impacts on fetal health and the risk of Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD). However, there are risks to other populations as well. Young people are vulnerable to increased drinking over time and may face consequences that arise in early and middle adulthood, including socioeconomic and mental health concerns. Among older Americans, drinking is related to early onset and more severe cognitive impairments/dementia. Interactions between alcohol and medications also increases risk of falls and other accidents, leading to increased risk of mortality.

What can we do about alcohol and our health?

Two months of the year have become popular opportunities to try drinking less, or not at all: Dry January and Sober October. But you don't have to wait until then to start rethinking your drinking. The NIAAA, through

extensive NIH funding and decades of research, developed resources exactly for that:

<https://rethinkingdrinking.niaaa.nih.gov/>.

For those who are struggling to manage their use, the NIAAA also provides a resource for navigating treatment: <https://alcoholtreatment.niaaa.nih.gov/how-to-find-alcohol-treatment>

¹Gallup (2025). U.S. drinking rate at new low as alcohol concerns surge.

<https://news.gallup.com/poll/693362/drinking-rate-new-low-alcohol-concerns-surge.aspx>

²Stockwell et al (2025) <https://www.jsad.com/doi/10.15288/jsad.25-00075>

³U.S. Surgeon General (2025). Alcohol and Cancer Risk. The U.S. Surgeon General Advisory.

<https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/oash-alcohol-cancer-risk.pdf>

⁴Sohi et al (2024) <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/acer.15493>

⁵NIAAA <https://www.niaaa.nih.gov/alcohols-effects-health/alcohols-effects-body>