

ALCOHOL AND CANCER: LET'S TALK

A guide to having conversations
about cancer prevention and alcohol



Supported by



ALCOHOL
HEALTH
ALLIANCE

HAVING THE CONVERSATION

Alcohol is common to daily life for many people but its impact on health, finances and overall wellbeing is often underestimated.

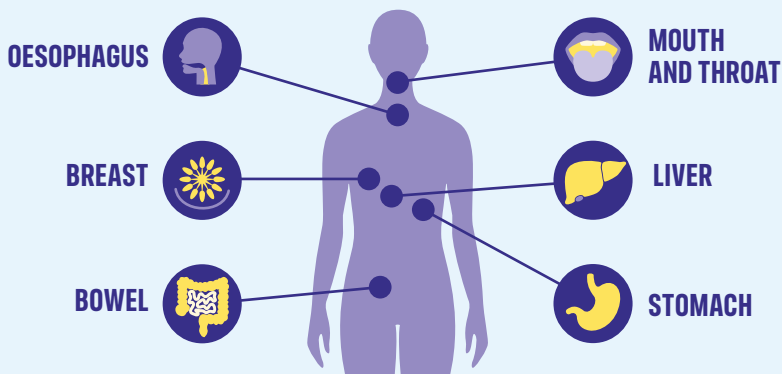
It is one of the biggest preventable causes of ill health, increasing the risk of life-changing conditions, like heart disease, liver damage and cancer. As a health professional, you play a vital role in supporting patients or clients to make positive steps. Many people appreciate clear, compassionate guidance that helps them towards better health.

This guide shares practical tips for you to have open conversations on alcohol and cancer prevention – ensuring these encounters are encouraging and free of judgment.



UNDERSTANDING THE RISK

Drinking alcohol increases the risk of several cancers, including:



Even small amounts can raise that risk which makes supportive conversations ever more crucial.

HOW ALCOHOL INCREASES CANCER RISK

When we drink alcohol, our bodies break it down into harmful chemicals like acetaldehyde that can damage our DNA, increasing the risk of cancer. Over time, regularly drinking alcohol can cause liver damage, including cirrhosis, which raises the risk of liver cancer.

Alcohol can also affect hormone levels, such as increasing oestrogen and insulin. Higher levels of these hormones can encourage cells to divide more rapidly – a process that further raises the risk of cancer. Drinking heavily is also linked with other lifestyle factors – such as smoking or having a poor diet – which again increases cancer risk.

Finally, alcohol contains a lot of empty calories. Drinking frequently or in large amounts can lead to weight gain, which is another known risk factor for several types of cancer.

Learn more about our research linking alcohol and cancer:

wcrf.org/alcohol

Use our alcohol calorie calculator to see how many calories are in different drinks: wcrf.org/alcohol-calorie-calculator

IS THERE A SAFE LEVEL OF ALCOHOL CONSUMPTION?

Current NHS guidance limits consumption to no more than 14 units of alcohol a week – spread across three days at least.

In reality, the evidence suggests that no level of alcohol consumption is truly safe regarding cancer risk.

Nevertheless, when dealing with patients and clients you should look to offer support and encouragement rather than to cause alarm.

Find out more facts in our Alcohol factsheet:

wcrf.org/alcohol-factsheet



WHEN TO START THE CONVERSATION

While the body of evidence about risk is clear, discussing alcohol and cancer with patients or clients can seem tricky. A good way of introducing the topic is during one of the following interactions:

- routine health checks
- lifestyle discussions especially during periods of unemployment, bereavement, break-ups etc
- conversations about heart or liver disease risk
- conversations about family planning or pregnancy
- when they express concerns about their drinking

HOW TO APPROACH A CONVERSATION

Use open-ended questions:

“How do you feel about your drinking in relation to your overall health?”

Make it routine:

“We are constantly learning about how alcohol affects physical health including its link to cancer. So, I like to make it a point to discuss it with all my clients/patients.”

Avoid judgement:

“Even small changes can make a big difference to your long-term health.”

HANDLING DIFFERENT RESPONSES

If they are open to change

Encourage them to change:

“That’s great! Even small changes can help.”

Refer them to easily accessible support and tools, such as the **NHS Drink Free Days app** or local support services.

If they seem hesitant or defensive

Stick to facts, no pressure:

"I understand – drinking is a personal choice and can sometimes feel uncomfortable to talk about."

Acknowledge:

"I just want to ensure you have the information."

Keep the door open:

"If you ever want to chat, I'm here."

HELPING THEM GET SUPPORT

Always remember to keep conversations non-judgemental, this will enable your patient or client to make informed decisions for better long-term health.

Encourage small goals:

"What small changes do you feel you can make right now?"

Listen to their responses carefully and suggest options if it sounds like they need them, such as:

- taking breaks from alcohol or alcohol free days
- staying hydrated by drinking plenty of water when drinking alcohol
- alternating their drinks with sugar-free soft drinks, low alcohol or alcohol-free drinks
- making a plan or setting a budget to limit the drinks consumed
- letting friends and family know they are cutting down so that they can support too



More tips about cutting down are available on the NHS website: [nhs.uk/live-well/alcohol-advice/alcohol-support](https://www.nhs.uk/live-well/alcohol-advice/alcohol-support)

MANAGING EXCESSIVE DRINKING BEHAVIOURS

Cutting down on alcohol improves health, but heavy drinkers will need professional support to reduce gradually and avoid complications.

If your patient or client is showing signs of regularly drinking excessive amounts of alcohol, eg a bottle of spirits, three bottles of wine or seven cans of strong lager – you should seek advice and support from local addiction services.

Patients with children or those who are pregnant or planning a pregnancy may also require specialist support.



To find local support services, visit the NHS website:
nhs.uk/nhs-services/find-alcohol-addiction-support-services

We're here to help reduce the risk of cancer

Our Cancer Prevention Recommendations give people the best chance of reducing their risk of cancer, find out more at: wcrf.org/recommendations

We provide a wide range of advice, guides and information to help you as a health professional: wcrf.org/health-professionals



FURTHER INFORMATION

Further advice and support is available for patients wanting to change their relationship with alcohol. Here are just a few:

General advice and support

Alcohol Support (NHS)

nhs.uk/live-well/alcohol-advice/alcohol-support

Alcohol Change

alcoholchange.org.uk/help-and-support/get-help-now

NHS Drink free app (download here)

nhs.uk/better-health/drink-less

Treatment and recovery

Alcoholics Anonymous, the 12 steps challenge

alcoholics-anonymous.org.uk/about-aa/what-is-aa/12-steps

SMART Recovery

smartrecovery.org.uk/smart-recovery-programme

Alcohol support services

nhs.uk/nhs-services/find-alcohol-addiction-support-services

Northern Ireland Alcohol Support

services.drugsandalcoholni.info/treatment-support

This guide has been produced in collaboration with **Scottish Health Action on Alcohol Problems (SHAAP)** shaap.org.uk



World Cancer Research Fund examines how diet, weight and physical activity affect your risk of developing and surviving cancer. As part of an international network of charities, we have been funding life-saving research, influencing global public health policy and educating the public since 1982.

While society continues searching for a cure, our prevention and survival work is helping people live longer, happier and healthier lives – free from the devastating effects of cancer.

For any enquiries or to request the information in large print, please contact us:

World Cancer Research Fund

140 Pentonville Road, London N1 9FW

Tel: 020 7343 4200 **Email:** resources@wcrf.org

f facebook.com/WoCRF

X x.com/WCRF_UK

@ instagram.com/wcrfuk

in linkedin.com/company/wcrf

wcrf.org

Preventing cancer. Saving lives

All information correct at time of print.

Next review date May 2028 WEJ5ALH

© 2025 World Cancer Research Fund



Registered with the Charity Commission in England and Wales (Registered Charity No: 1000739).