



Factsheet



Introduction

Breast cancer is by far the most prevalent and one of the most lethal cancers for women in the UK.¹ It affects around 1 in 8 women in the UK during their lifetime, and was diagnosed in nearly 50,000 women in 2011² and caused the death of over 11,000 in 2012.³



However, not everyone shares the same level of risk. Some lifestyle choices can have a substantial impact on the risk of developing breast cancer - in particular, alcohol, which is responsible for at least 6% of the 50,000 diagnoses from 2011.⁴ This means roughly 3,000 of the breast cancer cases were directly attributable to alcohol consumption.

However, very few people are aware of this link. Fewer than half of the British public know of any link between alcohol and cancer, and less than a third of a link between alcohol and breast cancer.⁵ This dangerous lack of knowledge constitutes a significant public health risk.

Alcohol consumption increases risk of developing breast cancer

Alcohol has long been known to have carcinogenic (cancer-causing) properties, and more than 50 studies have confirmed alcohol is a particular risk factor in the development of breast cancer. 6% of female breast cancer cases in the UK in 2010 were attributable to alcohol consumption.⁶

Consuming large amounts of alcohol or drinking on a daily basis increases the risk. Each drink per day increases the risk in women of developing breast cancer by between 7% - 12%.^{7,8,9,10}

Choice of Drink

The risk is not affected by the choice of drink.¹¹ The crucial factor is the *strength* of the alcohol and the number of drinks consumed. Drinking a higher quantity or stronger alcohol directly impacts on the risk of developing breast cancer.¹²

Why does drinking alcohol increase breast cancer risk?

The exact causal mechanism between alcohol and breast cancer is not fully known – but it is likely due to the way alcohol breaks down into toxic chemicals in our body and increases the production of the female hormone oestrogen.¹³



Alcohol has been linked with increased levels of oestrogen in the blood.

Drinking moderate amounts of alcohol has been linked with increased levels of oestrogen in the blood.¹⁴ Breast cells are particularly sensitive to oestrogen, and when exposed to higher-than-normal amounts may become cancerous.

Alcohol also breaks down into the carcinogenic compound 'acetaldehyde' inside the body. This substance causes genetic mutations and permanently damages DNA, which can trigger a response in the body leading to the development of cancerous cells.¹⁵

Alcohol and Breast Cancer



How can I reduce this risk?

There is no definite evidence that women who stop drinking altogether reduce their risk of developing breast cancer.¹⁶ However limiting alcohol intake may reduce the risk – given that drinking more alcohol *does* increase it.

While the NHS recommends women should not regularly drink more than 2-3 units of alcohol a day,¹⁷ it is important to remember there is no 'safe' level

of alcohol consumption. Drinking just two drinks a day still increases the risk of developing breast cancer by roughly 18%.¹⁸

If alcohol consumption was reduced to a very low level – less than one unit a week – an estimated 6% of breast cancer cases could be prevented.¹⁹ Sticking to government guidelines of alcohol consumption is a reliable way of minimising alcohol-related health risks.

References



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