

Mixing Alcohol with Your Diabetes

You can drink if your blood sugar is well controlled – and you take the right steps to be safe.

If you have diabetes, you may think that drinking is off limits. Not so! Keeping an eye on how much and what you drink can help you drink more safely. You can avoid the alcohol-related pitfalls:

- low blood sugar
- weight gain
- high blood pressure.

Before you have a drink, ask yourself the 3 questions below. The ADA (American Diabetes Association) suggests these:

- Is my diabetes in good control?
- Does my health care team agree that I can have alcohol?
- Do I know how alcohol can affect me and my blood sugar?

If you can answer "yes" to all 3 questions, it is likely OK to have a drink. But make sure you know the potential effects of drinking. And, make sure you know your personal limits.

What happens when you drink?

Between meals and while you sleep, the liver makes new glucose (sugar). The liver then sends this sugar into the bloodstream. Here, it helps to prevent or slow down a low blood sugar reaction.

When you drink, it disrupts the process. Substances form when alcohol breaks down in the liver. These substances block the liver from making new glucose. Blood sugars fall and you can quickly become too low.

Treat hypoglycemia quickly

Drinking can affect your blood sugar for up to 12 hours. So test your blood sugar before going to bed. If it is in the 100 – 140 mg/dL range, you may be fine. If it is lower, eat a snack to raise it. Try snacks such as half a sandwich; yogurt; or cereal with milk, cheese with crackers, or apple with peanut butter.

You can help prevent low blood sugar when drinking. Eat a meal or snack that has carbohydrates when you drink.

Hypoglycemia can mimic effects of alcohol

Some symptoms of low blood sugar can look the same as being drunk. The ones that are most common to both are feeling dizzy, light headed, or confused; and getting sleepy. Others may think your signs of low blood sugar are due to drinking. They may not realize you need help. Make sure your friends know that low blood sugar can look like being drunk. Wear or carry some form of ID that says you have diabetes.

Good drink choices

The ADA recommends:

- no more than one alcoholic drink per day for women
- no more than two drinks per day for men.

One drink is defined as:

- 12 ounces of beer
- 5 ounces of wine
- 1 ½ ounces of liquor.

Light beers or dry wines are good choices; they have less alcohol and fewer calories. If you like mixed drinks, use diet soft drinks, water or seltzer as your mixers. Avoid drinks high in sugar, including:

- sweet wines
- mixed drinks that are sugary (like piña coladas or wine coolers)

If you are counting your calories, make this exchange. The calories you will get from a drink can replace a serving of fat. But never exchange a drink for a meal.

If you drink often, tell your doctor or health care team at your check-up. Be sure to tell them before they prescribe you medicine. Also tell them if your drinking pattern has changed.

When to avoid alcohol

Having one drink at a party is not a problem for most people. For some people, it is best to avoid alcohol. This is true if you have long term problems from diabetes.

You have to be cautious if you have the conditions below. Drinking can make these worse:

- Burning or tingling in your hands and feet if you have nerve damage (diabetic neuropathy)
- Damage to your eyes damage (diabetic retinopathy)
- Blood pressure that is not controlled
- High triglycerides
- Damage to your kidneys.

Alcohol makes you more prone to high blood pressure. And, high blood pressure is a leading cause of kidney disease and strokes. Drinking can get in the way of medicines to treat high blood pressure. This will make your blood pressure harder to control.

Beware of pairing alcohol with some diabetes pills (especially chlorpropamide – Diabinese®); it can cause flushing of the face, arms and neck. You may notice other common subtle signs as well. You may:

- Feel lightheaded
- Have trouble with your balance
- Have an upset stomach.

If so, do not drink any more alcohol. Discuss it with your doctor before you drink again. It is not OK to drink if these symptoms are life threatening. If they are not, then in general, it is OK to drink cautiously. But, you must monitor your blood sugar.

Alcohol and heart health

Some studies link moderate drinking with a benefit; they link it with a lower risk of heart disease. If you have diabetes, you may worry about this risk. But researchers aren't completely sure; so if you don't drink, don't start. The potential upside may not be great enough for it. One thing is certain. Drinking too much is a problem; it will erase any benefits. And, too much will worsen long term health problems from diabetes.

The bottom line when it comes to drinking is this; there's no substitute for modest portions and control. Sip, don't guzzle your drink. Savor it.

Top tips if you drink alcohol

- Limit yourself to 1 drink per day for women and 2 drinks per day for men. This is fine if your blood sugar is in good control. If you have not reached good control, don't drink.
- Choose lower-calorie light beers; dry wines; or drinks mixed with diet soft drinks, tonic water, or seltzer.
- Tell your doctor or health care team if you drink regularly. Also tell them if your drinking habits change.
- Always eat a meal or snack when you drink to ward off low blood sugar. Test glucose before going to bed if you've had a drink that evening. If it's low, eat a snack.
- The calories you will get from a drink can replace a serving of fat. But never substitute a drink for a meal.

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