Factsheet:
Alcohol and breast cancer

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Drinking alcohol causes breast cancer. Understand the link between alcohol and breast cancer, recognise the symptoms and reduce your risk.

Evidence tells us drinking alcohol increases a person's risk of developing breast cancer.

Not everyone who drinks alcohol will get breast cancer, but the risk starts to increase even at low levels of drinking. **So, the less you drink, the more you reduce your risk.**

Around **eight out of every hundred cases** of breast cancer in women in the UK are estimated to be attributable to alcohol.

This factsheet explains the symptoms to look out for, why alcohol and other factors contribute to causing breast cancer, and what you can do to reduce your risk.

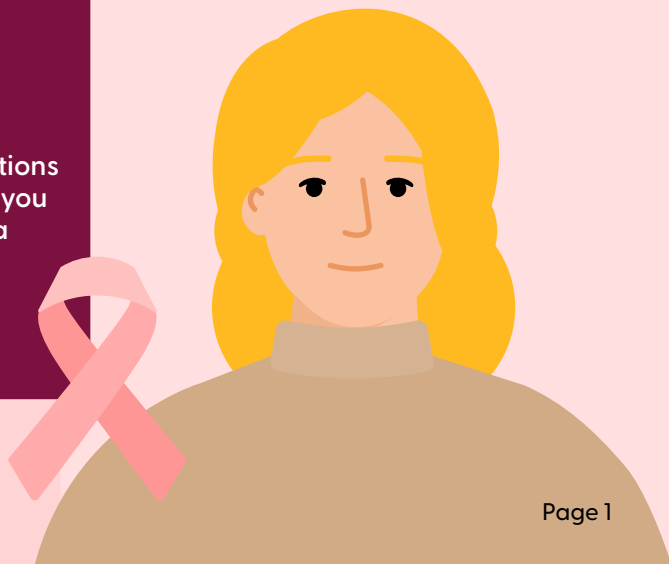
Breast cancer symptoms

Cancer Research UK advises that you should see a doctor if you have noticed:

- A change in the size, shape or feel of a breast
- A new lump or thickening in a breast or armpit
- Skin changes such as puckering, dimpling, a rash or redness of the skin
- Fluid leaking from a nipple when you aren't pregnant or breastfeeding
- Changes in the position of a nipple
- Breast pain

Most often these symptoms are caused by other medical conditions and they don't necessarily mean you have breast cancer. But if you experience any of them, it's important to get them checked by a doctor or another qualified member of your GP's team.

Visit Cancer Research UK to find out more about early breast cancer symptoms.



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Understanding breast cancer risks from alcohol

Breast cancer is the most diagnosed cancer in the world and is the most common cancer among women.

Drinking alcohol doesn't automatically mean you will get breast cancer, and not drinking alcohol cannot guarantee you won't, but scientists have found that some cancers, including breast cancer, are more common in people who drink alcohol, with the risk increasing the more you drink.

For breast cancer, there is no safe level of drinking alcohol - **the risk of breast cancer among women who drink alcohol at all is higher than among those who never drink.**

How does alcohol increase your risk of developing breast cancer?

The ways in which alcohol increases the risk of developing breast cancer are not fully understood but probably include:

- The body breaks down alcohol into a substance called acetaldehyde which is toxic to cells and recognised by the World Health Organisation as a carcinogen (cause of cancer). It can trigger responses in the body which leads to cancerous cells developing
- Alcohol increases levels of the female hormone oestrogen – high levels of oestrogen can cause vulnerable cells continually to excessively multiply and become cancerous

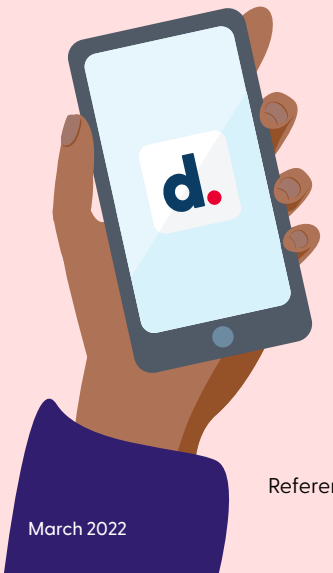
How can I reduce my risk?

Cancer Research UK estimates that almost a quarter (23%) of cases of breast cancer are preventable.

Making healthy lifestyle choices such as not drinking more than a few units a week or not drinking at all, not smoking, maintaining a healthy weight and getting physical exercise, can all help to reduce the risk of breast cancer.

Drinking alcohol increases your risk of many serious medical conditions. If you do choose to drink alcohol, to keep health risks from alcohol low, it is safest to drink no more than 14 units a week, spread over three or more days with several drink-free days, and no bingeing.

Breast cancer is rare in men and more research is needed to understand how alcohol may increase the risk of developing it. However, advice for men who choose to drink is the same as for women.



When you're ready to drink less, Drinkaware is ready for you. For more information, advice and tools to help you reduce your drinking, search Drinkaware.

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References: www.drinkaware.co.uk/facts/health-effects-of-alcohol/alcohol-related-diseases/alcohol-and-breast-cancer