



People have used alcohol to relieve pain since ancient times. Laboratory studies confirm that alcohol does indeed reduce pain in humans and in animals. Moreover, recent research suggests that as many as 28 percent of people experiencing chronic pain turn to alcohol to alleviate their suffering. Despite this, using alcohol to alleviate pain places people at risk for a number of harmful health consequences.

### What Are the Risks?

#### Mixing Alcohol and Pain Medicines Can Be Harmful

- » Mixing alcohol and acetaminophen can cause acute liver failure
- » Mixing alcohol and aspirin increases risk for gastric bleeding
- » Alcohol increases analgesic, reinforcing, and sedative effects of opiates, elevating risk for combined misuse of alcohol and opiates as well as overdose.

*If you're taking medications to manage your pain, talk to your doctor or pharmacist about any reactions that may result from mixing them with alcohol.*

#### Analgesic Doses of Alcohol Exceed Levels Recommended in the *Dietary Guidelines for Americans, 2020–2025*

- » According to the *Dietary Guidelines for Americans, 2020–2025*, if alcohol is consumed, intake should be limited to 1 drink or less in a day for women and 2 drinks or less in a day for men. The greatest pain-reducing effects occur when alcohol is consumed at doses exceeding these guidelines.
- » Tolerance develops to alcohol's analgesic effects so that it takes more alcohol to produce the same effects. Increasing alcohol use to stay ahead of tolerance can lead to other problems, including the development of alcohol dependence.

#### Chronic Alcohol Drinking Makes Pain Worse

- » Withdrawal from chronic alcohol use often increases pain sensitivity which could motivate some people to continue drinking or even increase their drinking to reverse withdrawal-related increases in pain.
- » Over time, alcohol misuse generates a painful small fiber peripheral neuropathy, the most common neurologic complication associated with alcohol use disorder.

*If you use alcohol to relieve your pain, it is important to learn about possible adverse health effects. Ask your health care provider if any alcohol use is safe for you.*

**For more information about alcohol and your health, please visit:**

**<https://www.niaaa.nih.gov>**

---

<sup>1</sup> U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and U.S. Department of Agriculture. Dietary Guidelines for Americans, 2020–2025. 9th ed. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2020, p. 29. Available at [https://www.dietaryguidelines.gov/sites/default/files/2020-12/Dietary\\_Guidelines\\_for\\_Americans\\_2020-2025.pdf](https://www.dietaryguidelines.gov/sites/default/files/2020-12/Dietary_Guidelines_for_Americans_2020-2025.pdf). Accessed January 6, 2021.

<sup>2</sup> Brennan, P.L.; Schutte, K.K.; and Moos, R.H. Pain and use of alcohol to manage pain: Prevalence and 3-year outcomes among older problem and non-problem drinkers. *Addiction* 100:777–786, 2005.

<sup>3</sup> Riley III, J.L., and King, C. Self-report of alcohol use for pain in a multi-ethnic community sample. *Journal of Pain* 10:944–952, 2009.



*NIH . . . Turning Discovery Into Health®*

National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism

<https://www.niaaa.nih.gov> • 301-443-3860

March 2021