

# ALCOHOL & HIV

A close-up photograph of a hand holding a glass of amber-colored alcohol, likely whiskey, with a black straw. The glass is partially filled and has a small amount of white foam or residue on the rim. The background is a plain, light-colored wall.

**A MIX YOU CAN AVOID**

When you are HIV-positive, you have to work hard to stay healthy. Drinking less alcohol — or not drinking at all — can help you fight HIV disease and improve your health. Quitting drinking or cutting down on drinking is just one part of leading a healthy lifestyle.

## **This brochure explains how alcohol:**

- Can make you forget to take your HIV medicines on time or not care about taking them at all.
- Hurts your liver, especially if you also have hepatitis C.
- Can weaken your immune system so that it does not fight HIV as well.
- Affects your judgment so you may not practice safe sex.
- Increases the risk of side effects from HIV medicines and other medicines.
- Changes how some prescription drugs work in your body and can make them less effective.

For many people, drinking is a response to life's problems and pressures. If you drink too much alcohol to deal with depression or the stress of living with HIV, talk with your doctor or healthcare provider.





## How much alcohol is too much?

There is no recommended “safe” level of alcohol use for people with HIV. Even drinking a lot on-again and off-again can make your HIV treatment more difficult. Here are some warning signs of drinking too much:

- You have trouble with personal relationships, miss work or medical appointments, or you verbally or physically abuse others.
- You have physical “withdrawal” effects — such as sweats or shaking — or health problems like pancreatitis or liver disease.
- You are not able to stop drinking once you start.
- You need alcohol to have sex.
- “Binge” drinking — you may not drink every day, but then you have 4-5 or more drinks at a time.

Talk openly with your doctor or a counselor about how much you drink. If you need help to confront a drinking problem, see page 8 for services that can help.

## How much alcohol is in a “standard” drink?

If you know how much alcohol is in a “standard” drink, you can figure out how much alcohol you consume. Each of the drinks pictured below contains about the same amount of alcohol. But the amount of alcohol in some drinks can vary. For example, some mixed drinks have more than one “shot” of liquor. Keeping track of how much alcohol you take in can help you cut down.



**BEER OR WINE  
COOLER**  
12 ounces  
5% alcohol



**MALT LIQUOR**  
8.5 ounces  
7% alcohol



**TABLE WINE**  
5 ounces  
12% alcohol



**80-PROOF  
LIQUOR**  
1.5 ounces  
40% alcohol  
(gin, vodka, whiskey, etc.)

## Alcohol, HIV, and your immune system

HIV attacks the body’s immune system. The immune system protects the body from infections and disease, but it can’t totally protect the body from HIV.

HIV medicines can decrease the amount of HIV in your body and help restore your immune system. Alcohol can weaken your immune system so that it cannot properly fight HIV.

### Physical side effects of alcohol:

- Can weaken your immune system so that it does not fight HIV as well.
- Can increase the risk of side effects from medicines.
- Liver and pancreas damage.
- Trouble sleeping.
- Stomach ulcers and problems with your digestive system.

## Alcohol, HIV, and your liver

Your liver breaks down waste products from your blood as part of your body's normal functioning. It also breaks down alcohol, medicines, and other toxins.

Alcohol and HIV can affect your liver in these ways:

- Alcohol harms the liver.
- Alcohol can interfere with your treatment for HIV and for hepatitis B or hepatitis C (see next page).
- HIV itself puts stress on the liver.

## To reduce liver side effects:

- Drink less alcohol or stop drinking.
- Get regular tests of your liver function as part of your HIV medical treatment — especially if you also have hepatitis. Tell your doctor or healthcare worker if you drink.
- Get tested for hepatitis. If you test positive, there are treatments that may help.

If your liver is damaged, avoiding alcohol is the best thing you can do to keep it healthy.

## Drinking and staying with your HIV medicine schedule

The worst effect that drinking can have is to knock you off schedule for taking your HIV medicines.

Taking several different HIV medicines can be complicated. You need to take them on time, take the right dosage, and know whether or not to take them with food. Heavy drinking and binge drinking can make you forget to take your HIV medicines or skip doses. Or you may become too depressed or frustrated to care about taking them on schedule.

## HIV, hepatitis C, and your liver

About 1 out of every 4 persons with HIV is “co-infected” with hepatitis C, a virus that cannot be cured. Most people with hepatitis C will develop a chronic, long-term form of the disease. If hepatitis C is not treated, it can lead to liver disease and cancer.

Hepatitis C is a lot like HIV — you can fight it by taking medicines and by making smart choices to lead a healthy lifestyle. Heavy alcohol use can speed up the damage to your liver caused by hepatitis C. The longer you have hepatitis C and continue to drink, the greater your chances of developing liver problems.

### If you have HIV and hepatitis C:

- Drink little or no alcohol. If you drink no alcohol, there is a better chance that hepatitis C medicines will work.
- Avoid alcohol before you start taking hepatitis C medicines and during treatment. If you do, there is a much better chance the medicines will work.
- If you can't quit drinking or reduce your drinking before taking hepatitis C medicines, talk with your doctor or healthcare worker about counseling or an alcohol “rehab” program.
- Stick with your schedule for taking separate medicines for HIV and hepatitis C.





## **Alcohol, sex, and the spread of HIV**

If you have HIV, take extra steps to avoid spreading the virus to others. Alcohol can affect your judgment when you have sex. You might forget to use a condom or not stick with a plan to protect yourself. Or, you may not realize the risk involved in a situation.

Some people use alcohol and drugs to increase their sexual enjoyment. If you engage in “high-risk” sex — anal sex or sex with multiple partners — and drink at the same time, you might not protect yourself. Make sure you:

- Use “barrier protection” — a male latex condom or a female polyurethane condom each time you have intercourse or a latex dental dam for oral sex. This can prevent the spread of HIV and protect you from “reinfection” with another type of HIV or another sexually transmitted disease (STD).
- Talk with your partner and agree on how to protect yourselves.

# Taking control of your drinking

If you decide you want to drink less or quit drinking, that's an important first step. Talk with someone you trust and get support. Talk with your doctor or healthcare worker because it relates to your HIV treatment. He or she can give you advice and recommend services to help you. Here are some things to consider:

- Set short-term goals: Reduce the number of drinks you have and/or how often you drink.
- Get a referral to talk with an addictions counselor. He or she can discuss the reasons why you drink and arrange for medical treatment if you need it.
- Join a support group: Share your thoughts and feelings with other people going through the same challenges.
- Find a treatment program: Some HIV treatment programs also provide services for substance abuse.

Don't give up hope if you slip back into drinking (relapse). Relapse is common. Keep your counseling appointments and keep talking with your HIV care providers about your long-term goals to be sober and fight HIV.



## Resources

### In New York State (outside of New York City)

New York State Office of Alcoholism and Substance Abuse Services (OASAS)  
Visit the website or call the number below to find alcohol treatment programs and services near you: 1-800-522-5353  
(Monday – Friday, 9 am – 5 pm)  
[www.oasas.state.ny.us](http://www.oasas.state.ny.us)

### In New York City

For crisis intervention and referral services, 24hrs/7days per week, call:  
1-800-LIFENET (543-3638); En Español: 1-877-AYUDESE

### Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) World Services

475 Riverside Drive, 11th Floor, New York, NY 10115  
212-870-3400

Makes referrals to local AA groups and provides information on the AA program. Many cities and towns also have a local AA office listed in the telephone book.

### HIV/AIDS Hotline (New York State Department of Health)

1-800-541-AIDS (English)  
1-800-233-SIDA (Spanish)  
Deaf and hard of hearing: 1-800-662-1220

### More HIV/AIDS publications

The AIDS Institute has a wide range of publications on HIV/AIDS at:  
[www.nyhealth.gov/diseases/aids/publications](http://www.nyhealth.gov/diseases/aids/publications)

