

# Diabetes and Alcohol

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If you wish to drink alcohol when you have diabetes, you will need to ask your doctor these questions:

- Can I drink alcohol?
- How much should I drink?
- What can I drink?



**Do not drink alcohol without talking to your doctor.**

He or she knows your medical history, and how well your diabetes is controlled. Your doctor will let you know if you can have alcohol.

Once you know you can drink alcohol, it is important to learn about:

- The effect of alcohol on the control of your diabetes.
- How to avoid running the risk of having a low blood sugar.

**You must be 19 years of age or older  
to legally drink alcohol in Ontario.**

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## How does alcohol affect my body?

The alcohol moves from your stomach into your blood.



The liver starts to break it down.



If you drink alcohol faster than the liver is able to break it down,  
the alcohol builds up in your blood.

When your blood alcohol level is high, your liver will  
work very hard to lower it.



If in addition to drinking alcohol, your blood sugar goes low from lack  
of food or from extra activity like dancing, the pancreas will make a  
hormone called glucagon.



Glucagon causes the liver to make more sugar. If the liver is too busy breaking  
down the alcohol, it will **not react** to the glucagon to make more sugar.



**The symptoms of low blood sugar can look like the signs of being drunk.**  
You and people around you may not even realize that your blood sugar is low.



**If your blood sugar goes too low, you can become unconscious.**  
Glucagon by injection may not work if you have been drinking a lot of alcohol.

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## What are the risks to my diabetes control?

### Alcohol can:

- increase the risk of low blood sugars when you are drinking, especially if you take insulin or some types of oral diabetic medications.
- increase the risk of low blood sugars overnight and the morning after you have been drinking. This can happen even after you eat breakfast.
- interact with some medications and cause side effects.
- make some conditions worse such as neuropathy, pancreatitis, ulcers and liver disease.
- increase triglyceride levels if taken regularly. Triglycerides are a type of fat in the blood. High levels can increase your risk for heart disease.
- prevent weight loss and lead to weight gain. Weight gain can upset your diabetes control.

## How do I help to prevent the risks?

### Here is a list of tips to help you drink alcohol safely:

- Follow your normal diabetes routine such as testing, taking insulin or other medications and regular meals. This will help you keep your blood sugars stable.
- Wear a bracelet showing you have diabetes and tell the people in your life that you have diabetes. Let them know the symptoms of a low blood sugar and what to do if it happens.
- Always carry:
  - your glucometer and test your sugar, especially if you start to feel the symptoms of low blood sugar.
  - a source of simple carbohydrate with you (eg. hard candies, juice box, dextrose tablets) and tell people where it is.
- If you are going to drink alcohol, have it with food. Be sure to eat more if you are active, such as dancing. If your beverage contains carbohydrate, discuss with your care provider as to how much insulin you might need.
- **Never take extra insulin for the alcohol you will be taking.**
- Drink slowly - this will prevent alcohol build-up in your blood.

- Stretch drinks with mixers that do not contain carbohydrates such as diet pop, water and soda water.
- Alternate alcoholic and non-alcoholic drinks.
- Limit your drinks to 1 or 2 at one time. Take no more than 14 drinks/week for a man and 9 drinks/week for a woman.
- Before going to bed, test your blood sugar. If it is low, eat a snack with carbohydrate before you go to bed.
- When you wake up, follow your normal diabetes routine such as testing, taking insulin or other medications and regular meals. Carry a source of simple carbohydrate with you even after breakfast, because there is still a risk of low blood sugar.

## Carbohydrate and Alcohol content of selected drinks

Drink	Carbohydrate Content	Alcohol Content	Calorie Content
12 oz Regular Beer (5 to 6% alcohol)	10 to 13 g	15 g	135 to 150 kcal
12 oz Light Beer (3-4% alcohol)	5 to 9 g	10 to 11 g	90 to 120 kcal
12 oz Low Carb Beer, eg. Sleeman Clear (4% alcohol)	2.5 g	11 g	90 kcal
1 ½ oz Whiskey, Rye, Scotch, Gin, Rum, Vodka	0 g	15 g	105 kcal
1 ½ oz Brandy or Cognac	0 g	15 g	105 kcal
5 oz Dry Red or White Wine (0)	0 g	13 g	100 kcal
3 oz Dry Sherry	0 g	15 g	105 kcal
12 oz Wine Cooler	30 to 43 g (flavours vary)	13 g	200 to 280 kcal

**Never take insulin for alcohol.**