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Alcohol and Your Heart

The old glass-a-day advice has changed. What counts as a drink, and what cutting back does.

About 14 g
of pure alcohol in one standard US drink

5 to 10
mmHg drop in systolic pressure heavy drinkers can get just by cutting back

10 to 20
points the pumping function can rise after stopping, if alcohol weakened it

WHAT COUNTS AS A DRINK

One standard drink, five ways

Each of these is one standard drink, about 14 grams of pure alcohol

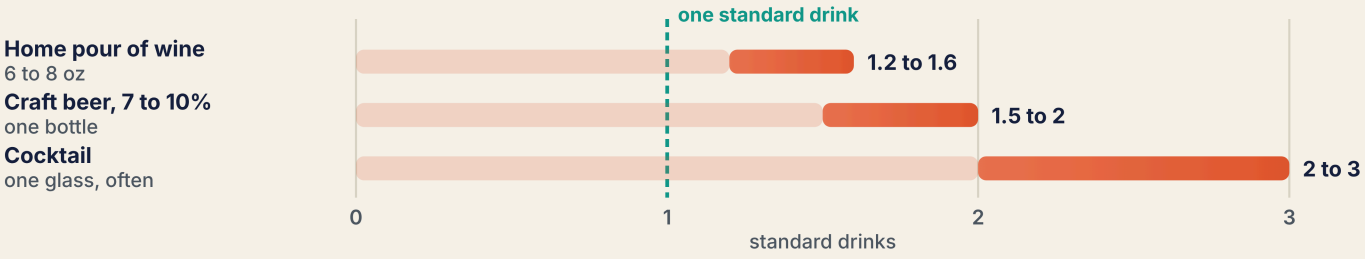


12 oz beer	8 to 9 oz malt liquor	5 oz wine	3 to 4 oz port or sherry	1.5 oz spirits
about 5% alcohol	about 7%	about 12%	17 to 20%	about 40%

Light drinkers once looked healthier, but the nondrinkers they were compared with included people who quit because they got sick. A 2022 genetic study of nearly 372,000 people found no protective effect of light or moderate drinking on the heart.

WHY COUNTING HELPS

Almost nobody pours that way



People who say "one or two glasses of wine a night" are frequently drinking the equivalent of 3 to 4 standard drinks. A few weeks of tracking in standard drinks is usually revealing.

Don't drink for your heart

If you don't drink, don't start for heart benefit. If you drink lightly, the harm is probably small, but the benefit is now considered absent. If you drink heavily, cutting back is one of the highest-yield things available to you.

LIMITS, WHAT CUTTING BACK DOES AND A PLAN ARE ON THE BACK

HOW MUCH IS TOO MUCH

The limits, and what cutting back does

HOW DRINKING IS DEFINED

in standard drinks

Moderate	The older US Dietary Guidelines limit was up to 1 drink a day for women and 2 for men. The 2025 to 2030 guidelines dropped the numeric limit and say to "consume less alcohol for better overall health." The 2025 AHA statement doesn't endorse that level as beneficial for the heart, though it doesn't call it severely harmful either.
Heavy	More than 4 drinks a day or 14 a week for men, and more than 3 a day or 7 a week for women. The harm to the heart scales with the dose.
Binge	5 or more drinks within 2 hours for men, or 4 or more for women. Fourteen drinks over 7 days is less harmful than 14 drinks on one Saturday night.

WHAT CUTTING BACK DOES

Blood pressure	Alcohol raises it starting around one drink a day. Most heavy drinkers see meaningful drops within 2 to 4 weeks of substantial reduction, with the full benefit at 3 to 6 months.
AFib	AFib risk rises 8 percent for every drink per day. In a randomized trial of drinkers with AFib, stopping cut how often AFib came back over 6 months. Even when complete abstinence isn't realistic, substantial reduction still helps.
Heart muscle	Years of heavy drinking, typically 6 or more drinks a day, can weaken the heart muscle (alcoholic cardiomyopathy). Many recover substantially or fully with complete abstinence, and pumping function can rise 10 to 20 points within 6 to 18 months of stopping.
Stroke	Heavy and binge drinking raise the risk of stroke from a clot and from bleeding. On a blood thinner, heavy or binge drinking raises bleeding risk sharply.

BEFORE YOU STOP

withdrawal can be an emergency

Heavy daily drinking	More than 6 to 8 drinks a day for weeks to months can lead to serious withdrawal if you stop abruptly, including tremors, anxiety, seizures and delirium tremens. Talk to a doctor before stopping. You may need medically supervised detox.
Call 911	For seizures, confusion or hallucinations after stopping, or for palpitations with fainting or near-fainting, chest pain, trouble breathing or confusion. A fast, irregular heartbeat that keeps going but feels tolerable needs a same-day visit.

A WORKABLE TARGET

For many people that is no more than 7 drinks a week, no more than 2 in any 24 hours and at least 3 to 4 alcohol-free days. If you drink more than 14 a week as a man or 7 as a woman, or your attempts to cut back have failed, professional help substantially improves your odds. Naltrexone and acamprosate each roughly double the chance of staying alcohol-free.

READ THE FULL ARTICLE

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alcohol-heart-health

For education only, and not a substitute for advice from your own physician. Sources include the 2025 AHA scientific statement on alcohol, Biddinger et al. (JAMA Network Open 2022), Voskoboinik et al. (NEJM 2020) and Larsson et al. (BMC Medicine 2016).

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