
Non-Alcoholic Is Lower in Calories

Spring brings many opportunities to indulge in alcoholic beverages. Cold beer at a baseball game, champagne at a wedding, or a bottle of wine at a picnic. Most experts agree that alcohol is fine in moderation. But alcoholic beverages add calories to your meal and may replace more nutritious drinks. If you are watching your weight, switch to lower calorie, nonalcoholic beverages.

Nutrient Content

Alcohol is made by fermenting carbohydrates. It offers no nutritional benefits but does supply 7 calories per gram. Caloric content is more than carbohydrate and protein (4 calories per gram) and less than fat (9 calories per gram). These empty alcohol calories add up quickly, leading to increased body fat and weight gain. Alcohol can also interfere with nutrient absorption.

Moderation

For most people, alcohol is safe in moderation. That's one drink per day for women and two drinks per day for men. One drink is 12 ounces of regular beer, five ounces of wine, or 1.5 ounces of 80-proof distilled spirits (gin, rum, vodka, whiskey, and scotch).

Benefits

Research suggests that moderate drinking, in the amounts recommended above, may help reduce the risk of heart disease. Red wine, in particular, contains phytochemicals that protect your heart. But if you don't currently drink alcohol, this is not a good reason to start. A low-fat, near vegetarian diet that is high in fiber along with regular exercise, and abstinence from smoking are the best ways to fight heart disease.

Dangers

Alcohol's detrimental health, social, and economic effects can be seen in the 14 million alcoholics in the U.S. Drinking more than the recommended amounts of alcohol can increase your risk for high blood pressure and stroke. Heavy drinking leads to numerous health problems, like damage to the liver, brain, heart, and pancreas and an increased risk for some cancers. Alcoholism has a hereditary link; those with a family history of this disease should use caution.

Others who should not drink alcohol include women who are pregnant, trying to conceive, or breastfeeding, as well as all children and teenagers. Alcohol can also have adverse interactions with some over-the-counter and prescription medications.

Nonalcoholic Alternatives

- When dining out or socializing at a bar, you can always order your favorite drink without the alcohol—a “mocktail” or “virgin.”
- Or try something simple, like mineral water with a twist of lemon, lime or orange.
- Many restaurants now serve beer without alcohol.

At home, you have more options.

- Ice cubes made from fruit juice add flavor to sparkling water.
- Make your own wine coolers by adding fruit juice and sparkling water to a small amount of wine.
- Stock up on maraschino cherries, lemon and lime slices, and party-style drink accessories.

Compare the alcoholic beverages to the alternatives.

- You'll save calories and in some cases gain nutritional benefits.
- In addition, since alcohol can make you feel less inhibited, you may eat more when you do drink.
- Those calories can add up quickly, too.

By Hollis Bass, MEd, RD.

