

How Long Does Alcohol Stay in Your Body

The short and scientific answer: It depends.

Unlike food, alcohol is very quickly absorbed into the bloodstream. Most of the alcohol is broken down by chemicals called enzymes. The rest of it leaves the body through urine, sweat, saliva and even breath. The effects of drinking can vary greatly from one person to another, partly due to genetics. But generally [the more you drink, the more enzymes your liver creates](#) and the faster the alcohol will be metabolized in your system. There are limits, however. Heavy drinking can eventually cause liver damage, which means fewer enzymes and it becomes much more difficult for the body to break down the alcohol.

In any case, [alcohol stays in a person's system well after their feelings of intoxication have worn off](#). While alcohol is largely untraceable in the bloodstream after about six hours, it can be detected by a breathalyzer for as long as 24 hours, and it may still be found in urine some three days after a night of drinking. Although the legal definition of intoxication varies only slightly, place to place, there is a wide variance in how different people will respond to the same level of inebriation. Factors ranging from size to gender can affect this.

[Generally speaking, men tend to have an easier time with alcohol](#), due to lower levels of a key stomach enzyme in women, as well as body-fat and body-water differences. Likewise, a smaller person of any sex will usually feel a relatively stronger effect. Eating makes a difference too because food in the stomach slows down the absorption of that dinner cocktail. Also, if someone is downing shots or any alcohol in quick succession—especially without food—the liver has to work overtime, meaning a stronger impact on the mind and the body, whether the drinker wants that or not.

Alcohol and medical problems

Alcohol will leave an impact on the body over time regardless. [Heavy drinking can quite literally shrink the brain](#). When the cells get smaller, that can slow down a range of important brain functions, including learning and the ability to remember things. [A shrinking brain can even make it more difficult for a body to maintain a steady temperature and control its movements](#). Alcohol is no friend to the stomach either. It tends to irritate the lining, causing everything from nausea to ulcers. Drinking also disrupts normal digestion, potentially leading to heartburn, acid reflux and chronic diarrhea.

When it comes to the heart, alcohol leaves its mark there as well. Heavy drinking can cause an irregular heartbeat, strokes, high blood pressure and damage to the heart muscle. The liver of a heavy drinker will be more prone to hepatitis, fibrosis and

cirrhosis. Drinking can also lead to a dangerous inflammation of the pancreas and a higher risk of certain cancers. [The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services has gone so far as to call alcohol a “known human carcinogen.”](#)

Ironically, [heavy drinking of alcohol can even lead to dehydration](#). That’s because the drug effectively turns off production of a hormone that is supposed to limit the production of urine. That can spell kidney damage in the long term. Although alcohol may help some people to fall asleep, that’s not quite a silver lining. Sleeping off a night of drinking won’t likely amount to the high-quality REM sleep needed for bodily restoration. In fact, in the long run alcohol is more likely to cause insomnia.

Signs of alcohol dependency

[Although about 44% of U.S. adults consume alcohol, most are light to moderate drinkers](#). Little more than 7 percent of the population—or about 14 million Americans—would be diagnosed as alcoholics. Early signs of dependence include drinking more or longer than you had planned or having difficulty cutting back on your overall alcohol consumption. The problem is likely getting more serious when drinking interferes with work, school, family or relationships, or if one continues to drink despite medical or behavioral problems or has to drink even more than before to get the desired effect.

An alcohol problem is more than how much a person drinks, but how often, the medical and behavioral consequences, and what happens when a drinker tries to stop or cut back. Those who think they may have a drinking problem should speak with their doctor who may prescribe treatment or make referrals for counseling or support groups.

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