



PATHWAYS

A Study of Breast Cancer Survivorship

A NEWSLETTER FOR STUDY PARTICIPANTS

WINTER 2024

Alcohol & Breast Cancer

As with many things, the news about how alcohol affects our health seems to change. We used to hear it might be good for the heart, then that it causes cancer. Luckily, we have learned a great deal, and now experts agree: If you don't drink, it's preferable not to start. For those who choose to drink, women should have no more than one drink per day and men no more than two per day.

We looked at research done in the Pathways Study and elsewhere, expert summaries of the evidence, and asked breast cancer survivors to share their thoughts. Here's what we found.

Alcohol Raises Cancer Risk

Years of strong evidence shows that drinking alcohol increases the risk of several kinds of cancer, including breast cancer. That risk is "dose-dependent," which means that the more a person drinks, the more the risk of breast and other cancers goes up. Alcohol increases levels of the hormone estrogen, and when the body breaks down alcohol, it produces acetaldehyde, a carcinogen, and free radicals that can damage DNA.

Of Pathways Study participants, just over a third (37%) reported very little or no drinking in the six months around being diagnosed, while a third (33%) had ¼



to less than 3 ½ drinks per week and just under a third (30%) drank more regularly than that.

We asked breast cancer survivors about their drinking. Peggy said "I have always enjoyed a glass of wine in the evening." Alejandra told us, "I don't *never* drink but my drinking is *very, very* sporadic, like once a year if

that. I choose to not drink believing that alcohol may not be good for good health." Wendy said: "I abused alcohol and tobacco from ages 18 to 31, when I became a sober woman. (I was) diagnosed with stage 2 estrogen (receptor) positive breast cancer (BC) at age 47 and I'm thoroughly convinced that alcohol abuse was a huge part of the perfect storm for me getting breast cancer."

After Breast Cancer

Pathways participants generally drank less alcohol in the 6 months after diagnosis. Pam said: "I stopped drinking through treatment to be nice to my liver and because I was unsure whether or not alcohol would add to my risk of cancer growth. When I was on Tamoxifen, any amount of alcohol made me sick, so I stopped even the occasional glass of wine."



Our own Pathways researchers, led by Dr. Marilyn Kwan, recently published a study about drinking alcohol. They found that drinking

alcohol around the time of and up to 6 months after breast cancer diagnosis was not associated with risk of recurrence or death. (Kwan ML, Valice E, Ergas I, et al. Alcohol consumption and prognosis and survival in breast cancer survivors: The Pathways study. ([zbclink.org/PA14](https://www.zbclink.org/PA14))) This is a strong study with the goal to examine the effect of alcohol in the short-term period after breast cancer diagnosis. Past studies have shown mixed results and more studies are needed to look at longer-term risk of recurrence or dying related to drinking alcohol. And there is still concern that drinking can increase the risk of a new breast cancer or other type of cancer.

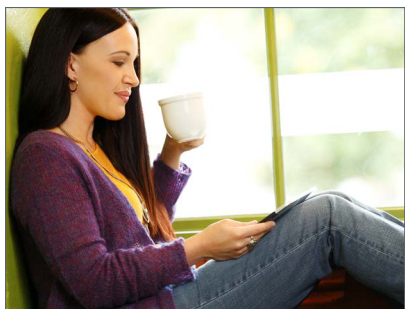
Alcohol, Stress and the Heart

Not long ago, light to moderate alcohol intake was considered healthy by some doctors. Light to moderate

Continued inside



drinkers seemed to have fewer heart attacks and strokes than those who didn't drink or who drank more. But years of study only found small changes in cholesterol and a protein related to blood clots, and given that



alcohol can raise blood pressure, experts came to agree that alcohol is not as good for heart health as previously thought.

A recent study found evidence that lower levels of alcohol use reduced the stress response in people's brains. However, doctors and experts are suggesting other, healthier ways to reduce stress. ([zbclink.org/PA2](https://www.zbclink.org/PA2))

- **Exercise:** Regular physical activity releases endorphins, natural mood-enhancing chemicals, in the brain and improves sleep; natural settings give an extra boost.
- **Deep Breathing and Meditation:** Being quiet and breathing deeply, progressively relaxing muscles, or meditating activate the parasympathetic nervous system, which calms the brain.
- **Practice Gratitude:** Writing down 2-3 things you are grateful for each day can help you to gain clarity and focus on what you truly appreciate in life.
- **Try a Hobby:** Drawing, playing an instrument, gardening, taking a class, or writing poetry can serve as a positive outlet for stress while having fun.
- **Socialize:** Sharing concerns, seeking advice, joining a group, or simply spending quality time with friends and family can provide comfort and a sense of belonging.

Does Cancer Affect Drinking?

A recent national study found many people being treated for cancer and longer-term cancer survivors reported regularly drinking alcohol. Alcohol use did not decrease after a cancer diagnosis. ([zbclink.org/PA3](https://www.zbclink.org/PA3)) While many Pathways participants drank less for some months, drinking levels returned to almost where they were before diagnosis within two years. Peggy said "Once all the surgeries and treatments were completed, I resumed drinking wine."

Cancer survivors reported more heavy drinking and more frequent heavy drinking occasions compared to others at the same ages with similar drinking histories ([zbclink.org/PA4](https://www.zbclink.org/PA4)). One study had more men reporting heavy drinking after cancer, while the other had more women reporting it after diagnosis. And, unfortunately, rates of heavy drinking increased during the COVID pandemic. The isolation and lack of social connection was hard on almost everyone.



Loneliness isn't just about being alone, either, it's also about being satisfied with the connections you have. Chronic loneliness impacts many aspects of health, and alcohol can actually worsen feelings of loneliness and depression. Check out our last Pathway Forum (Sept. 2023) where Dr. Candyce Kroenke highlighted the importance of being connected to others, whether family or friends. ([zbclink.org/PathwaysWebinars](https://www.zbclink.org/PathwaysWebinars)) She said we need to work on creating systems to support people's connection and she offered advice for individuals ([zbclink.org/PA5](https://www.zbclink.org/PA5)).

Drinking can be a social activity, and it can also become a habit, which is why experts suggest we try to be mindful about alcohol.

Be Mindful Before You Drink

For those of us who drink alcohol, it's good to keep in mind what is "moderate" drinking. For women it is one drink a day; for men, one or two drinks a day. The type of alcohol doesn't matter, but the quantity and the proof or percentage of alcohol do. One drink is 5 ounces of 12% wine, 12 ounces of 5% beer, or 1.5 ounces of 80-proof liquor. ([zbclink.org/PA10](https://www.zbclink.org/PA10)). Watch out for big differences in alcohol content and size. U.S. wines are often labeled from 13.5-14.5% alcohol, and craft beers usually have from 6-10% alcohol and come in pints (16 oz).

Here are more tips to help us be more aware of our drinking if we choose to drink ([zbclink.org/PA11](https://www.zbclink.org/PA11)):

- Restaurants and bars often serve larger than standard size alcoholic drinks



- Be ready to say “no thanks” if you’re offered a drink when you don’t want one
- Sip slowly to make it last
- Use drink “spacers” (have non-alcoholic drinks between alcoholic ones)
- Order smaller sizes
- Avoid asking for a double
- Enjoy low or no-alcohol drinks (like mocktails or non-alcoholic beer)
- Keep some days alcohol-free each week



Image: National Institutes of Health

Based on your health, age, medications, and how alcohol affects you personally, you may want to consider drinking less, or not at all. Kristi told us: “As a survivor there is so much to celebrate and wine, in my case, is part of that celebration. However, I now find that alcohol is a significant contributing factor to other health issues as I age, and I want to minimize future problems and continue to be a survivor.”

Need Some Help?

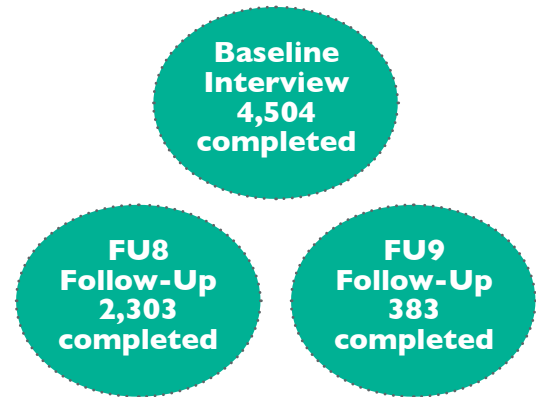
Some people are able to stop or cut back on drinking on their own or with help from a counselor or support group. Wendy got help from Alcoholics Anonymous. People with moderate to severe alcohol use disorder may need medical treatment. Kaiser Permanente has a self-assessment tool that can help a person determine if they are drinking within the recommended healthy limits – or if they should consider quitting or cutting back (zbclink.org/PA12).

Alcohol use disorder is a common health condition and it can be treated. Talk to a health care provider if you or a loved one have questions or may need some help.

For more information or to explore facts about alcohol, go to: zbclink.org/PA13.

We are grateful for your role in Pathways. All of you add meaning and diversity to our team and contribute your unique perspective to the information we are gathering. Thank you for participating! 🌟

Pathways Update – Who Is Participating?



Pathways Forum

We had our second Pathways Forum webinar in September 2023, hosted by our community partner, Zero Breast Cancer. Two of our researchers spoke about how our communities impact survival and quality of life. Many webinar attendees asked about how and where to get support, and our panel emphasized that our medical systems and community structures play a large role in what is available and the quality of support during and after treatment. Resources vary by place. Where there is more money, more services are usually available. People who live in neighborhoods with others from a similar culture often feel a greater sense of community. You may view a recording of the webinar at zbclink.org/PathwaysWebinars.

If you attended the Forum and would like to give us feedback, you can reach out to us with your comments by calling our toll-free number: 1-866-206-2979 or emailing us at DOR-pathways@kp.org.

Save the Date!

Upcoming Pathways Forum
April 25, 2024, 11:00 a.m.-12:30 p.m. PT

For the most up to date information on the Pathways study, please visit our website:
<http://pathways.kaiser.org>

New Contact Information?

In order to keep in touch with you we must have your latest contact information. Please let us know if your phone number or home address has changed. You can reach us by calling our toll-free number: 1-866-206-2979 or email us at dor-pathways@kp.org. 🌟



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