

Getting on well with alcohol

1. Good aspects of alcohol from a medical perspective

There are good and bad aspects to alcohol. It is important to understand both sides well and get along well with alcohol. There is no need to explain the mental effects of alcohol. It makes you feel good, relieves anxiety, eases conversation, makes you feel relaxed, and so on. It would be no exaggeration to say that people drink for these reasons.

The benefits of alcohol for one's health have been clarified, and can be summarized as follows:

- 1) Alcohol thins the blood, making it less prone to clotting. For this reason, there is a reduced tendency to develop diseases caused by blood clots, such as cerebral infarction, myocardial infarction, and angina.
- 2) Although the cause is not always clear, alcohol tends to reduce the incidence of memory problems in certain types of diabetes and in elderly people.

2. Drinking in moderation

It is important to note that the health benefits of alcohol are seen when you drink a small amount. (Recent reports indicate that even small amounts of alcohol can adversely affect your health.) The Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare has issued the following Moderate Drinking Guidelines, based on the health effects of alcohol. If you exceed this amount, you will develop the associated health problems.

Table 1. Moderate Drinking Guidelines

1) Moderate drinking for middle-aged men
A daily average equivalent to ≤ 20 grams of pure alcohol
20 grams equates to around 500 mL of beer (one midsized bottle), one glass of Japanese sake (180 mL) and 100 mL of 25% shochu (distilled alcohol)
2) Moderate drinking for women and elderly people
A daily average equivalent to ≤ 10 grams of pure alcohol
Half of the aforementioned amounts

3. Health problems associated with excessive drinking

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), alcohol can cause more than 200 diseases and injuries. Excessive drinking can damage almost all your organs. Examples of such health problems include:

- 1) Nutritional disorders
If you continue to drink without eating enough, you will become malnourished. Your muscles become thin and wasted, and you become dehydrated and suffer from chronic diarrhea. Vitamin deficiency can damage the brain and cause memory problems.
- 2) Liver damage
As the drinking increases the liver accumulates fat (fatty liver). If you continue to drink after this point, your liver will harden and you will develop liver cirrhosis.
- 3) Pancreatitis
Pancreatitis is a serious disease that causes severe pain that irradiates from your stomach to your back. Drinking is the biggest cause of pancreatitis in men.
- 4) Hypertension
Alcohol increases blood pressure. It is said that drinking an average of 1 glass of sake will increase your systolic maximal blood pressure by 2 to 4 mmHg (mercury column). In hypertensive people, the increase is even greater.

- 5) Cancer
Alcohol increases the risk of developing cancer, from the mouth to the esophagus. The risk is reported to be even greater in people whose faces turn red after drinking.
- 6) Dementia
Excessive drinking destroys nerve cells in your brain, causing it to shrink. It also increases the risk of cerebral infarction and cerebral hemorrhage, which results in dementia.
- 7) Depression
Drinking too much can cause depression. People with depression and insomnia tend to rely on alcohol and subsequently drink more alcohol. Alcohol also increases the risk of suicide.

4. Family and social problems

Alcohol causes various family and social problems. Examples include:

- 1) Accidents due to drink driving
- 2) Family discord, domestic violence, divorce, separation
- 3) Child abuse or neglect
- 4) Job loss and financial problems

5. How much drinking is too much?

Drinking more than the moderate drinking amount stipulated on the previous page is excessive drinking. The Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare particularly calls attention to heavy drinking when the average daily intake of alcohol is 60 grams or more. 60 grams is equivalent to 3 bottles of beer, 3 glasses of sake, and 300 mL of 25% shochu.

6. Goals for reducing alcohol intake

Goals for reducing alcohol intake are as follows.

- 1) If your alcohol intake falls under heavy drinking, you must make an effort to reduce your drinking immediately. In terms of the reduction goal, first choose a level that you feel you can achieve by yourself. It is recommended to consult with a doctor or public health nurse to ascertain if it is an appropriate amount.
 - 2) Even if you are not yet at the stage of heavy drinking, it is good to reduce your alcohol intake. Your goal should be the moderate drinking amount described on the previous page.
 - 3) If your doctor or public health nurse informs you that you may have alcoholism, it is recommended to abstain from alcohol.
-