

Alcohol-Associated Liver Disease: A Guide for Patients

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VA



U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs

Veterans Health Administration
HIV, Hepatitis, & Related Conditions Programs

What is Alcohol-Associated Liver Disease?

Alcohol-associated liver disease (ALD) is a common form of liver disease in the United States. It is sometimes called alcohol-related liver disease, and was previously called alcoholic liver disease. People get ALD by drinking moderate to large amounts of alcohol for months to years. It doesn't matter whether the alcohol is from hard liquor, beer, or wine. Alcohol from any type of drink can cause liver damage, leading to cirrhosis of the liver, and even liver cancer.

Excessive alcohol consumption contributes to 3 types of liver disease:

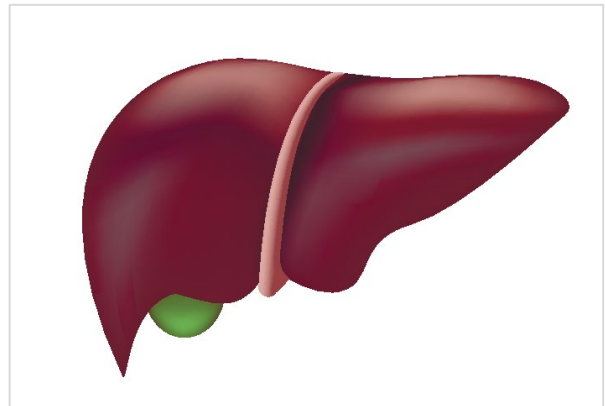
1. Fatty liver, where excess fat builds up in the liver
2. Alcohol-related hepatitis, in which the liver becomes inflamed and liver cells die
3. Alcohol-related cirrhosis, in which normal liver tissue is replaced by non-living scar tissue

It is important to know that drinking alcohol can also harm people who have other types of liver disease such as fatty liver disease related to being overweight or having diabetes.

How does alcohol harm the liver?

Your liver is one of the largest and most important organs in your body. Your liver has many important jobs:

- Filters your blood
- Makes proteins, including blood-clotting factors (needed to help you heal)
- Stores vitamins, sugars, fats, and other nutrients
- Helps regulate hormones
- Releases chemicals and nutrients into the body when needed
- Makes bile needed for digesting fats
- And much more



Drinking alcohol damages the liver whether binge drinking or drinking less for a longer period of time. When the liver is damaged, it can't perform these important functions well. In addition to weakening the liver, alcohol can also affect your immune system, your blood pressure, your thinking skills, and your mood.

So how much alcohol is too much?

If you have ALD or any other liver disease, it is important that you do not drink alcohol. Ask your provider for resources if you need help to stop drinking.

Many people wonder how much alcohol can cause issues like liver disease. Studies have shown that women experience liver disease at lower levels of alcohol intake than men. Many liver specialists agree that liver disease is likely at these levels:

- For women: 2 or more units of alcohol daily on a regular basis
- For men: 3 or more units of alcohol daily on a regular basis



**12 ounce beer
(5% alcohol)**

**4-5 ounce glass
of wine
(12% alcohol)**

**1-1.5 ounce shot
of hard alcohol
(40% alcohol)**

One unit of an alcoholic beverage contains approximately 12 grams of alcohol. A unit is roughly equivalent to one 12-ounce bottle of beer (5% alcohol); one 4-5-ounce glass of wine (12% alcohol); or one 1-ounce shot of hard liquor (40% alcohol). Note: there are many different kinds of beer and wine available that can contain more alcohol per unit than described above. Always check the label for alcohol content.

Some people will experience liver damage even if they drink less.

In a person with chronic liver disease (such as hepatitis B or C or fatty liver disease), alcohol can cause even more liver damage than it would in people without those liver diseases. At present, no one knows whether there is a safe level of alcohol for people with are already living with liver disease.

The good news is that the livers of heavy drinkers can improve if they stop drinking entirely. However, abstinence is often difficult to achieve.

How do I know if I have an alcohol use disorder?

There are screening tools that your provider may use to determine if you have an alcohol use disorder. One of these tools is called the Alcohol Use Disorders Identification Test (AUDIT-C). It asks three questions about how much and how often you drink.

Learn more: <https://www.hepatitis.va.gov/alcohol/treatment/audit-c.asp>

AUDIT-C

The Alcohol Use Disorders Identification Test is a publication of the World Health Organization, @ 1990

Q1: How often did you have a drink containing alcohol in the past year?

Answer	Points
Never	0
Monthly or less	1
Two to four times a month	2
Two to three times a week	3
Four or more times a week	4

Q2: How many drinks did you have on a typical day when you were drinking in the past year?

Answer	Points
None, I do not drink	0
1 or 2	0
3 or 4	1
5 or 6	2
7 to 9	3
10 or more	4

Q3: How often did you have six or more drinks on one occasion in the past year?

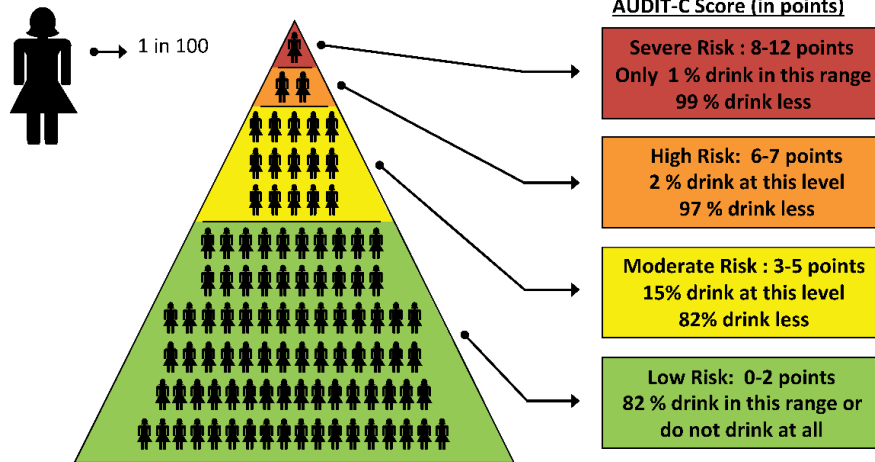
Answer	Points
Never	0
Less than monthly	1
Monthly	2
Weekly	3
Daily or almost daily	4

The AUDIT-C is scored on a scale of 0-12 (scores of 0 reflect no alcohol use). In men, a score of 4 or more is considered positive; in women, a score of 3 or more is considered positive. Generally, the higher the AUDIT-C score, the more likely it is that the patient's drinking is affecting his/her health and safety.

After completing the AUDIT-C, look at these cards which show how your drinking compares to other Veterans:

Women, age 30 and older

How many others drink as much as you?



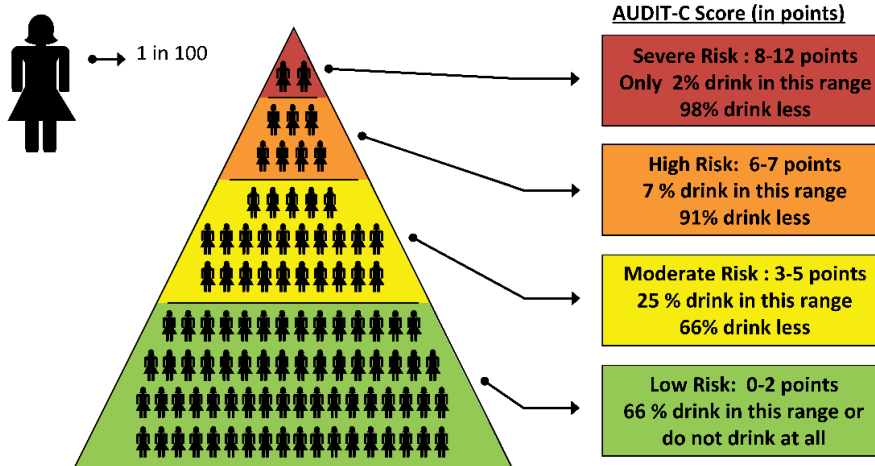
The **AUDIT-C** is a questionnaire given to thousands of VA patients. This triangle shows how your drinking compares to Female Veterans, age 30 and older.

Women who score 3 or higher drink above recommended limits and are at increased risks for harm.

Source: Survey of Healthcare Experiences of Patients, 2008, VA Office of Quality and Performance

Women, age 29 and younger

How many others drink as much as you?



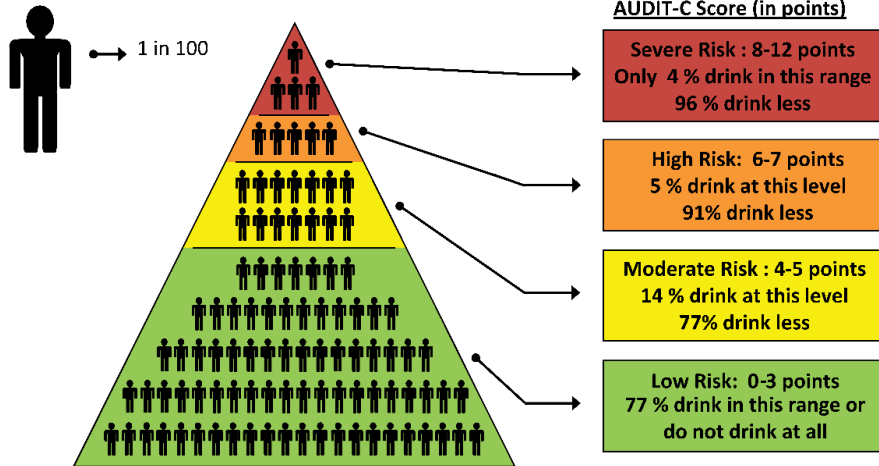
The **AUDIT-C** is a questionnaire given to thousands of VA patients. This triangle shows how your drinking compares to Female Veterans, age 29 or younger.

Women who score 3 or higher drink above recommended limits and are at increased risks for harm.

Source: Survey of Healthcare Experiences of Patients, 2008, VA Office of Quality and Performance

Men, age 30 and older

How many others drink as much as you?



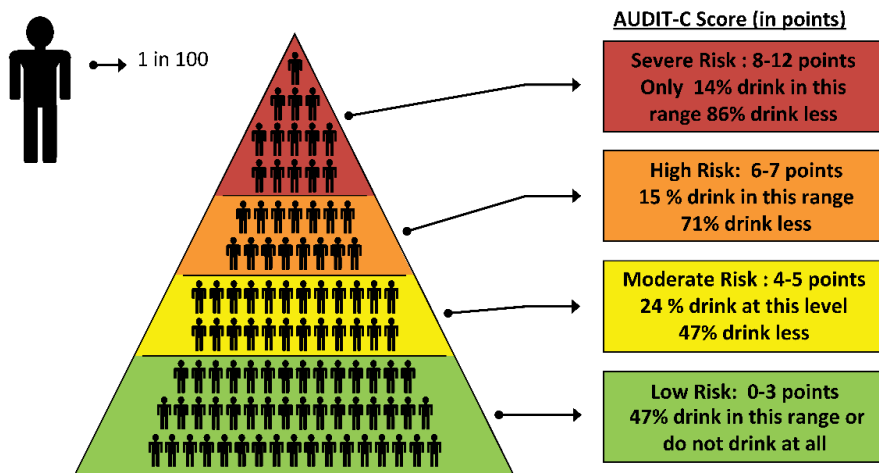
The AUDIT-C is a questionnaire given to thousands of VA patients. This triangle shows how your drinking compares to Male Veterans, age 30 and older.

Men who score 4 or higher drink above recommended limits and are at increased risks for harm.

Source: Survey of Healthcare Experiences of Patients, 2008, VA Office of Quality and Performance

Men, age 29 and younger

How many others drink as much as you?



The AUDIT-C is a questionnaire given to thousands of VA patients. This triangle shows how your drinking compares to Male Veterans, age 29 and younger.

Men who score 4 or higher drink above recommended limits and are at increased risks for harm.

Source: Survey of Healthcare Experiences of Patients, 2008, VA Office of Quality and Performance

Tools to address and treatments for alcohol use

VA has many resources that can help you address alcohol and substance use. Talk to your provider for more information, review these resources, and read the rest of this section for descriptions of services and treatments.

- ✓ [VA Substance Use Disorder Program](#)
- ✓ [Make the Connection website](#): hear stories from Veterans about their own experiences with overcoming drug and alcohol problems, and get access to more resources and support.

Alcohol drinking diary and change plan

To keep track of how much you drink, use a drinking diary. Record the number of drinks you have every day. At the end of the month, add up the total number of drinks you had during each week.

One way to make any kind of change in your behavior is to come up with a "change plan." This exercise has you list the specific goals you would like to achieve, outline the steps and challenges you will meet in reaching those goals, and figure out ways to overcome those challenges. (Example [Drinking Diary and Change Plan available on our website](#)).

Brief Interventions

Your provider may use a brief intervention to talk to you about alcohol use. Brief interventions are counseling sessions that last 5-15 minutes. Your provider will use motivational approaches to talk about change behavior. They will also give feedback and suggestions respectfully, without judgment or accusations.

Evidence-Based Psychotherapy

Evidence-based psychotherapy or "talk therapy" is effective for treating substance use disorders (SUDs). Each VA medical center offers one or more talk therapies as well as effective medications for the treatment of SUDs. Many VA medical centers and clinics provide other clinical services for SUD in addition to the evidence-based treatments listed below.

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy for Substance Use Disorders (CBT-SUD)

CBT-SUD teaches Veterans how to reduce their substance use to improve their quality of life, usually in weekly meetings with a therapist for about 12 weeks. The treatment helps Veterans develop more balanced and helpful thoughts about themselves, others, and the future. It also helps Veterans manage the urge to drink or use drugs, effectively refuse alcohol and drug use opportunities, learn a problem-solving approach to deal with substance use, and achieve their personal goals.

Motivational Interviewing (MI) and Motivational Enhancement Therapy (MET)

MI, another evidence-based intervention, is a conversation between the Veteran and provider to draw out and strengthen motivation for change. The MI approach explores the reasons why you might want to make a change and the potential benefits of the change.

MET is a version of MI that involves a brief assessment with feedback and focuses specifically on changing alcohol and/or substance use. MET is particularly helpful when Veterans are first

considering making changes or are unsure about the extent of their problems with alcohol and drug misuse.

12-Step Programs

For over 80 years, Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) has been a widespread Alcohol Use Disorder recovery organization, with millions of members and treatment free at the point of access. There is [evidence of the effectiveness](#) of AA and other 12 step programs. Visit www.aa.org or search for other 12 step programs in your area for more information.

Pharmacotherapy

VA providers may use medications to treat alcohol dependence. Effective medications can help manage withdrawal symptoms, reduce cravings, and promote abstinence. Medications may include: Acamprostate, Disulfiram, Naltrexone and Topiramate.

Additional resources:

[Alcohol and Liver Disease \(video\)](#)

This 4-minute video was created for general education on alcohol use for people who have liver disease.

[Hepatitis C and Alcohol](#)

An easy-to-read fact sheet detailing alcohol's effects on the liver and hepatitis C.

[VA Substance Use Disorder Program](#)

[Make the Connection website](#)

[Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Website](#)

[Alcoholics Anonymous](#)

[American Liver Foundation](#)

[Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration](#)

[National Institute on Alcohol Abuse/Alcoholism](#)

[Alcohol Screening](#)