It's estimated that 1 in 9 women will develop the disease at some point in their lifetime and 1 in 28 will die of it. However, breast cancer death rates have decreased in all ages in Canada since the mid 1990s, due to more awareness, better screening, and treatments. (Canadian Cancer Society’s Steering Committee, 2009)

Breast cancer is caused by a combination of risk factors. Risk factors are things that may increase the chances of getting the disease. Having a risk factor, or even several, doesn’t mean you’ll get the disease, it means the chance of developing the disease is greater. There are different kinds of risk factors for breast cancer; some can be changed and some can’t. A person’s age or race can’t be changed, but risk factors linked to personal behaviours, such as smoking, drinking, and diet can be changed.

Alcohol is a known risk factor for several cancers. It increases the risk of cancers of mouth, voice box, throat, esophagus, and liver. Recently, it has also been identified as a risk factor for breast cancer. The International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC) and the US National Toxicology Program has listed alcohol as a known human cancer causing agent (Aronson, K., 2003).

Recent research (Aronson, K., 2003) has explored the relationship between alcohol intake and breast cancer risk. Since alcohol intake is a risk factor that can be changed, information regarding its link to breast cancer may offer women ideas on how to decrease their risk of developing this disease.

Many research studies (Smith-Warner, S.A., et al, 1998) have shown that drinking alcohol regularly, even small amounts, is linked to a slightly higher risk of developing breast cancer. Some studies also show the more alcohol you drink, the higher your chance of getting breast cancer at some point in your life. For example, there’s a significantly increased risk of breast cancer development if you drink two or more drinks daily over a number of years (Aronson, K., 2003).

ALCOHOL IS A KNOWN RISK FACTOR FOR SEVERAL CANCERS.
How does alcohol increase the risk of breast cancer?

The exact means by which alcohol increases the risk of breast cancer isn’t known. The most common theory is that drinking alcohol changes the levels of hormones in your body, including the female sex hormone estrogen. Estrogen is needed for breast development during puberty and for the functioning of the female reproductive system. However, this hormone also fuels the growth of many breast cancers. Some research has found that estrogen levels are higher in women who drink more alcohol. This increase in estrogen levels may increase the chance of breast cancer.

Does the kind of alcohol you drink affect breast cancer risk?

Current evidence (Aronson, K., 2003) shows that all types of alcohol (wine, beer, or spirits) are linked to an increased risk of breast cancer.

At what level of drinking does the risk of breast cancer increase?

Studies have shown that drinking about two to five drinks per day may increase the risk of breast cancer by 40%, as compared to women who don’t drink. This increased risk is similar to other well-established risk factors (i.e., family history, age, and race). For example, the risk of breast cancer among women who have a family history of breast cancer is increased by about 50% or more as compared to women who don’t have a family history of the disease (Aronson, K., 2003).

Should women drink alcohol?

The decision whether or not to drink alcoholic beverages needs to be made by you with the help of your health care provider. If you have any other well-established risk factors for breast cancer, such as a family history of the disease, you may want to seriously consider limiting your alcohol intake.

Where to look for more information?

Canadian Cancer Society
www.cancer.ca

Centre for Addiction and Mental Health
www.camh.net

Key references:


