

How long does alcohol stay in your body?

July 2021

The facts

There are a number of factors that affect how long alcohol will stay in your body.

Alcohol enters the body through the stomach.

Alcohol can be detected in the blood and urine.

The effects of alcohol come from its presence in the blood and body tissues.

Generally, the liver can process up to 29.6 milliliters of alcohol an hour.

How does the body process alcohol?

Approximately 20% of the alcohol a person drinks is absorbed rapidly into the bloodstream through the stomach and approximately 80% is absorbed by the small intestines.

Once the alcohol is in the bloodstream, 95% goes to the liver where it is processed or metabolised. The liver produces enzymes that will break down the alcohol molecules.

When drinking alcohol quickly, the liver cannot process all the alcohol at the same rate, so it will remain in the body.

Any remaining alcohol that is not metabolised leaves the body through sweat, urine and saliva.

The higher blood alcohol concentration the more pronounced the effects are, such as: confusion, slurred speech, impaired memory, reduced inhibitions, impaired balance and coordination.

What affects the rate alcohol is processed through the body?

July 2021

The facts

The average person metabolises approximately 1 standard drink (10gms) each hour but can vary based on the following:

Age & Gender

Blood flow is slower in older people and alcohol may stay in the liver longer.

An older person may be taking medication that affects the liver, which means that the alcohol is processed at a slower rate increasing the amount of alcohol absorbed by the body.

Alcohol may tend to stay in a woman's system longer than in a man's .

Food

Having a full stomach can slow down alcohol absorption dramatically.

Race

Some people of East Asian descent lack the enzymes necessary to break down alcohol.

Family History

Research has shown that alcohol use disorder, or alcoholism, tends to run in families, suggesting a genetic link. However, in some instances genetics alone are not responsible for a person's alcohol dependency.

Body Size

Like other drugs and medications, a person's body size can impact how alcohol is processed. A person with a smaller body frame will be more affected than a person with a larger body frame.

Time From Last Drink

The longer the break between drinks the more able the liver is able to process the next drink.

Medications

There are some medications that can affect how the body is able to process alcohol, talk to your doctor about whether it is safe to drink with your prescribed medications.

How Long Does Alcohol Stay in The System?

July 2021

The facts

How long alcohol is detected in the system depends on what is being tested.

Blood

The concentration of alcohol in the blood (BAC), helps to determine the amount of alcohol in a person's body. Generally alcohol is eliminated at 0.015 per hour. For example if a person has a blood alcohol of 0.08 it will take around 5.5 hours to flush the alcohol out of their body.

If a person drinks a lot or on an empty stomach they may still have alcohol in their system the next day, which could put them over the legal level of 0.05% for driving.

Urine

It depends on the test used some urine tests are more sensitive than others. Currently there is a test that can detect alcohol use up to 80 hours (3 - 4 days), after a person's last drink.

Breath

Alcohol can be detected in the breath for up to 24 hours after the last drink.

Hair

Hair testing can be used to detect alcohol and many different substances. Alcohol can be detected in hair for approximately 90 days after the last drink.

Breast Milk

Alcohol remains in breast milk for as long as it lasts in the blood.

Saliva

Tiny amounts of alcohol can be detected in a saliva swab for approximately 10 - 24 hours after the last drink.

What Are The Long-Term Risks Of Drinking?

July 2021

The facts

Short-Term Risks

- Accident
- Aggression
- Injury
- Violence
- Interpersonal Conflict

Long-Term Risks

- Cardiovascular disease - hypertension, arrhythmias, haemorrhagic stroke
- Cancers - oral cavity, pharynx, larynx, oesophagus, liver, colorectum and breast
- Nutrition-related conditions - malnutrition, vitamin A and B3 depletion
- Liver Disease - fatty liver, cirrhosis, cancer
- Mental health problems - depression, self-harm, anxiety disorders
- Cognitive impairment
- Tolerance and dependence
- Foetal alcohol syndrome

Withdrawal

Alcohol withdrawal can be mild to severe, with symptoms normally occurring within hours of the last drink, peaking in intensity after 2-3 days and subsiding 5-6 days later.

Common symptoms of mild to moderate withdrawal include:

- tremors
- restlessness
- insomnia
- nightmares
- sweats
- tachycardia
- fever
- nausea
- vomiting

Symptoms of severe withdrawal include:

- seizures
- hallucinations - visual, auditory & touch
- severe agitation
- tremors
- delirium tremens (DTs)
- cardiac arrest
- death