

# The Accidental Binge Drinker: How Much We Really Pour

Chances are you're drinking far more alcohol than you think.

The reason? Wine, beer and spirits glasses are surprisingly deceptive, and most of us—even professional bartenders—are over-pouring the alcohol we serve.

While too much alcohol obviously adds calories to your diet, other consequences of super-sizing alcoholic beverages are even more worrisome. The health benefits of alcohol disappear and risk increases when

you drink more than a few servings a day. And because over-pouring can double or even triple a standard serving size, many of us are technically “binge” drinking without knowing it, wreaking havoc on our livers and overall health.

A standard “serving” for an alcoholic beverage is 5 fluid ounces of wine, 12 ounces of regular beer or 1.5 ounces of distilled spirits, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. All three portions contain 0.6 ounce of alcohol. But glasses today come in so many different shapes

and sizes—tall “highballs,” wide tumblers, bowl-shaped wine goblets and now the new popular stemless wine glasses—it's virtually impossible to estimate the right serving amount. Although a traditional wine glass holds about 7 ounces, many wine glasses today hold 16 ounces or more. Beer glasses often hold 20 ounces.

“Often my clients think they are just having one or two drinks, when really they're having more like three or four,” says Lisa R. Young, a New York University nutritionist.

Try this experiment at home. Take your favorite wine or beer glass and use water to estimate drink size. Pour the contents into a measuring cup to see how close you come to the standard 5-ounce wine portion or 12-ounce beer portion.

I did this myself, and was stunned by the result. I filled my favorite wine glass just half full. But I still ended up with 300 milliliters or 10.14 ounces—double the standard serving size. I tried again—this time with a smaller wine glass and then again with a large bowl-shaped goblet. But each time I still poured 200 milliliters or 6.76 ounces—35% too much.

The British Medical Journal published a study of 196 college students and 86 bartenders, asking them to pour drinks into different-



**Varying glass sizes** can make it hard to gauge how much alcohol you are pouring.

size glasses. The study used 355-milliliter glasses, but one was a tall, thin highball glass and the other was a short, wide tumbler.

Study participants were asked to pour a serving of alcohol (1.5 ounces or 44.3 milliliters) needed to mix a gin and tonic or other popular drinks. They over-poured by 33% when using the short glass, but came close to the right serving with the tall, thin glass, pouring just 3% too much. Even the bartenders, who had an average of six years experience, poured 25% too much when using the tumblers.

Another Duke University study also found college students over-poured shots by 26%, mixed drinks by 80% and beer by 25%. And the bigger the cup, the more the students overestimated a serving size.

Pouring too much clearly adds calories. Each additional ounce of beer contains about 12 calories while an ounce of wine contains about 20 calories. But the bigger worry is that the maximum health benefits of alcohol

come with just less than one serving a day for women and up to two servings for men. At that level, heart protection is high but risk for other alcohol-related health problems is at its lowest, studies show.

People who drink somewhat more—for women, two to three drinks a day; for men, three or four—aren't getting any extra benefit. Their overall risk, balanced with the benefits, is the same as people who don't drink at all. But once women go above three drinks and men go above four drinks, they put themselves at far higher risk for other alcohol-related problems.

Binge drinking is defined by the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism as four drinks for a woman and five drinks for a man over a two-hour time frame. “People do not know how to assess how much they are drinking, and when they have two drinks on a Friday night, it is really four or five because there are multiple doses in one giant cup,” says Julia Chester assistant professor of psychological sciences at Purdue University.

Dr. Young says that a solution is for drinkers at restaurants to count each glass of wine, beer or spirits as two servings. And at home, conduct practice pourings with a measuring cup to see what a real serving looks like in your own wine goblet or drinking glass. And avoid short, wide glasses that increase your risk of over-pouring.

Email [healthjournal@wsj.com](mailto:healthjournal@wsj.com).



By Tara Parker-Pope