

# Wine, Beer & Spirits: Do They Trigger IC Flares?

## *A Patient Survey Reveals Surprising Results*

There is no doubt that alcohol can trigger bladder symptoms in patients with IC. Ninety-four percent of 535 patients responding to the ICN's IC and Alcohol survey (2009/2010) reported that their frequency, urgency or pelvic pain did increase when drinking various alcoholic beverages but there was a substantial difference in the types of alcohols consumed and the reactions they provoked. Some alcohols were far less likely to trigger discomfort than others.

Not surprisingly, bladder pain was the most common reaction with more than 75% percent of the patients reported an increase in pain after drinking any alcohol. 72% of the patients reported more trips to the restroom (frequency) after consuming alcohol. An increase in

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urgency (59%) and pressure (56%) were also reported.

Most alcohol induced flares were, thankfully, fairly short term. Only 5% of patients reported that their flare lasted longer than a week. 33% reported that their flares lasted a few days. 35% reported that their increase in symptoms lasted only a day and a lucky 22% reported that the flare was very short term, lasting only a few hours.

Yet, IC patients are very cautious about drinking alcohol for fear of triggering an IC flare. One patient offered *"I could drink a bit of wine one day and be okay but have the same wine another time and have a flare. I*

*never know how I will react so I don't drink anymore."* Nearly one third of the participants (32%) have chosen not to drink alcohol at all. Sixty percent of patients only drink alcohol when their bladder is feeling good. Pain is apparently not a deterrent for the 8% of patients who drink alcohol even when their bladder is hurting.

Of those who do drink alcohol, the trend is to drink sparingly. More than half of the participants (56.3%) only drink alcohol once a month or less often. 30.9% of patients enjoy an alcoholic beverage just once a week. 9.8% said that they had alcohol frequently throughout the week

but only 2.8% had a daily drink.

The worst offender was clearly wine, with 74% of patients reporting flares. Mixed drinks, likely due to bladder irritating mixers, caused flares in 61% of patients. Beers triggered symptoms in more than half of the patients (56%) participating. Straight alcohol spirits were the least offensive at just 35% of patients reporting flares which confirms some of the patient stories we've received about straight alcohol being more bladder friendly. But, as you will see, there was also substantial variation in each category. Some spirits were clearly worse than others, just as some wines were more tolerable than others. Let's look at the results more closely.

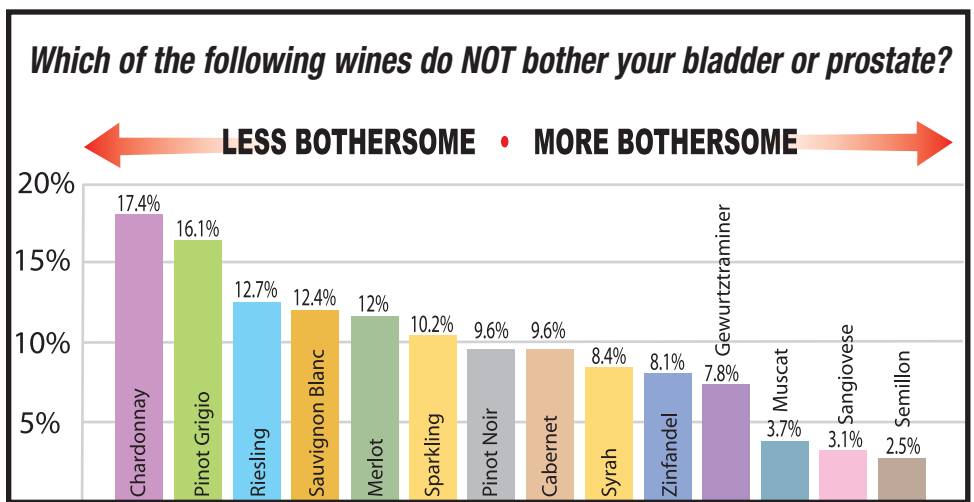
### Wine

Wines are clearly tolerated by some but not all patients who participated. Twenty one percent reported that they can drink wine without irritating their bladders at all. Another 31% reported that they can sometimes drink wine without irritation. 48% of patients reported that wine always irritates their bladders.

One patient offered "I have found that white wine is not as painful to drink," which supports the overall results of the survey. White wines clearly provoked fewer reactions than red wines, likely due to the extra added histamines found in red wine. Chardonnay, pinot grigio, riesling and sauvignon blanc were popular favorites and appeared to cause the fewest problems. Muscat and semillon bothered far more patients.

As we would have predicted due to its lower acid content, merlot was the best tolerated red wine with 12% of patients reporting that it did not bother their bladder. Cabernet, syrah and zinfandel received modest reviews and sangiovese was the most irritating reported red wine.

Clearly, as with the IC diet, wine tolerance is also highly individualized. Patients had a wide variety of opinions and comments about what wines they could tolerate with some



advocating the benefits of white wines while others reporting that they could only tolerate red wines.

*I find that white wines are easier on the bladder than red ones - I absolutely cannot have reds as they trigger both bladder problems and migraines for me. With whites, it helps to have one that is not aged in oak (pinot grigio, riesling, others) - I find oaky chardonnays are out of the question, because they can actually trigger fibro/myofascial pain symptoms as well. Riesling is a good wine for me because it is not oaky and it is usually not as acidic as other types, which also eases bladder discomfort. Just don't overdo it!* - Survey respondent

Some reported that wines free of sulfites and/or the more organic wines were easier on their bladders.

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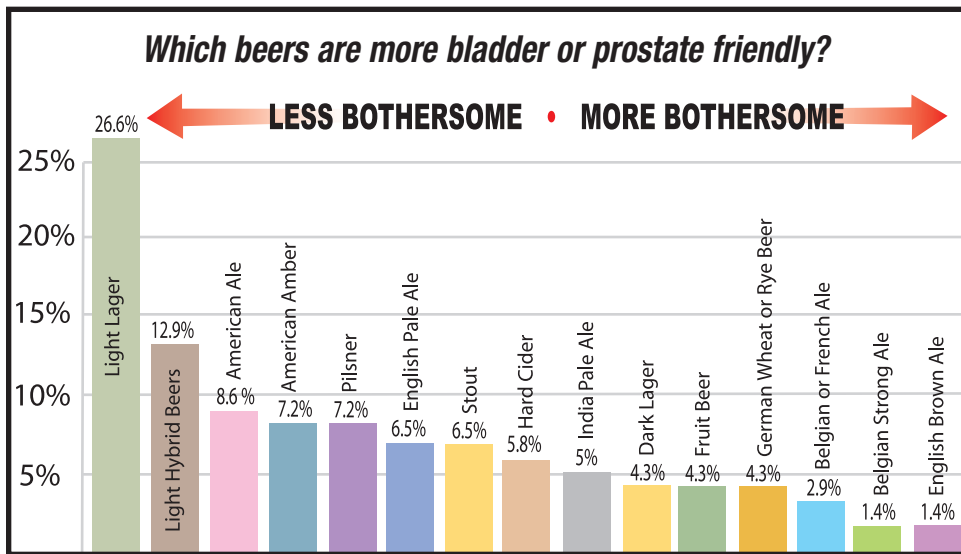
There was quite a bit of regional disparity reported. Some said that they tolerated Sonoma Valley or California wines while others suggested that imported wines worked best for them.

Champagnes appear to trigger fairly violent reactions in some patients. One said "Last night, I had one glass of champagne and was in excruciating pain a couple of hours later." Yet another patient reported that champagne did not bother them "Only once did I not have an episode and it was from a high quality pink champagne."

Several fruit wines were favorably mentioned by patients including blackberry wines, elderberry wines, blueberry wines, Arbor Mist fruit wines and, most surprisingly, someone recommended Brown County Apple Cranberry Wine.

There were several suggestions about how to make wine more tolerable. Quite a few patients reported using Prelief when they drank wine with some success at reducing symptoms while others diluted their wine with soda water or ice to reduce the overall acid levels. One patient offered "I do take Prelief along with the first glass of wine. I also drink a glass of water along with or immediately following a glass of wine" which, we think, is an excellent strategy. Drinking water during and after alcohol consumption just makes sense.

Clearly, wines can trigger IC discomfort and should be approached



with caution and a solid plan to handle any flares that could occur.

### Beers

Like wines, beers provoked a variety of responses. Some patients reported that all beer bothered their bladders, "I have had multiple flares from any beer I drank so I have not had a beer in 3 years just to avoid any pain." Another offered "All beer irritates my bladder almost immediately." Yet, other patients seem to tolerate beers well, "Beer does not seem to bother me at all..." Clearly, though, patients do look at beer with caution. "I really can't say beer makes my IC act up however I do tend to avoid alcohol during an IC attack."

Clearly, lighter beers were the most popular favorite with 26% of patients reporting that they don't bother their bladders. Light hybrid beers came in second with 13% of patients reporting that they could tolerate it well. Darker beers and ales, such as English brown ale were the most irritating.

Miller Genuine Draft Light and the award winning Blue Moon™ beer label received the most positive mentions in the survey results.

Microbrews are clearly a growing trend in the beer industry and yet at least one patient noted that he did better with a national brand. "I actually find that these mass produced ones, Miller's Genuine Draft Light, are easier on my bladder than microbrews - I

don't know why, but I hate it because I used to love trying microbrews!!" Yet another offered "microbrewery beers are all I've been able to find and only in extreme moderation."

Like wine drinkers, some beer drinkers reported that they use Prelief successfully to help reduce any possible symptoms.

### Alcoholic Spirits and Mixed Drinks

At first glance, most patients would assume that drinking straight alcohol would be the worst for their bladders and yet we have had some patients report that they have been able to tolerate small amounts of straight alcohol. One of the goals of this survey was to verify these reports and, yes, the survey results did just that. Some straight alcohols were more easily tolerated than wines, beers and mixed drinks. Why? We just don't know. Sake, scotch and brandy were the best tolerated alcoholic spirits while tequila, liqueurs and vodka seemed to trigger more

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bladder symptoms.

Mixed drinks seem like a mine field because so many mixers can be bladder irritating. When we asked patients what mixed drinks were more “IC friendly,” their answers were diverse and often conflicting. Eliminating citrus juices, such as lemon or orange, was a popular and logical theme, as well as avoiding artificially sweetened drinks, such as diet cokes.

Several patients reported that they did better with light color or clear alcohols. One said “I’ve found that light color and/or clear liqueurs are the safest for my bladder. The mixed drink that I found that is best for my bladder is also easy to order out and quite refreshing. Simply add Malibu Rum (or any coconut rum) with club soda. If my bladder is in a good place on that day, I also ask for a lime wedge. All alcohol will cause some pain in my bladder within 1 to 3 days of having the drinks but this Malibu Rum and Club soda leaves me about as pain-free as possible.”

Milk based drinks received a several favorable reviews, such as white russians, Baileys Irish Cream on the rocks, Grasshoppers or eggnog with rum.

Vodka drinks were, by far, the most frequently suggested in the survey. “I stick to Vodka mostly - Vodka with San Pellegrino works well. If I can get a flavored vodka (like pear or blue-

berry) I like to drink it on the rocks - and it doesn’t bother my bladder.”

Straight, vodka with water, vodka with ice or vodka with blueberry, peach or pomegranate juice received several positive mentions in the survey despite the fact that vodka did score as the third most irritating alcohol on our list. One patient offered two variations that we think sound quite appealing. “Vanilla Absolut Vodka mixed with Trader Joe’s Unfiltered Gala Apple juice - rim glass in a mixture of cinnamon and sugar. Pear Absolut Vodka mixed with Gerber’s Pear Juice.”

Rum drinks were also suggested by several patients, most frequently root beer and rum. Since root beer is naturally low in acid and caffeine free, it makes sense that it could be more bladder friendly when compared to, perhaps, coke drinks. One patient reported that she tolerated rum and eggnog quite well. Another reported that “lighter rums are more tolerable for me.” Coconut rums received four solid reviews from patients, including the Joe’s Crab Shack Coconut daiquiri with coconut rum, coconut cream and pineapple sherbet.

Margaritas received both good and bad reviews. One patient reported that she had two margaritas early last June that “did myself in.” Still another said “I drink margaritas and as long as I drink water with them I usually do not have a problem the next day.”

One patient reported an extreme flare and “awful pain that lasted a week” from drinking Mike’s Hard Lemonade which, of course, does make sense due to the high acid content of lemonade. The vast majority of patients reported that they stay away from all citrus juices and sodas.

If there was a trend in the two hundred or so suggestions we received about mixed drinks, it was to combine a clear “top shelf” liquor brand, usually vodka, with water or ice, with a chaser of more water.

## Conclusion

It’s clear that IC patients have strong, individual reactions to both foods and alcohols. But, as with our food sensitivities, our alcohol sensitivities strongly relate to the overall health of the bladder wall. One patient noticed that when her IC treatments are working well, her bladder can tolerate more alcohol “Currently, as I have been on a successful treatment plan, I can drink wine, beer and scotch. When I was not on a successful treatment plan, anything bothered me.” Logic suggests that patients with Hunner’s ulcers and/or badly inflamed bladders are probably going to have more pain with alcohol than patients with milder IC.

Given the fact that 94% reported that alcohol has triggered their bladder symptoms, we think that patients should avoid most if not all alcohols when their symptoms are active and/or they are suffering from bladder pain. But, when those symptoms improve, it may be reasonable to try one of the lower acid wines, light ale beers or clear alcohol drinks suggested previously. Try a small amount first, and always follow that drink with water to dilute the effect of the alcohol and your urine. Please remember that some medications should never be combined with any form of alcohol. The acid reducing supplement, Prelief, was mentioned several times by wine, beer and straight alcohol drinkers as helping to reduce some symptoms, as well.

