

Cheers: Drinking to Good Health?

Can drinking alcohol actually be good for you?

There have been many studies about the risks and benefits of moderate alcohol consumption. The results have been confusing and conflicting. For every report about the benefits of alcohol on health, another seems to warn you of the risks.

Physical health benefits of moderate drinking

Recent research has shown that *moderate* alcohol consumption, defined as two drinks a day if you're a man or one drink a day if you're a woman, is associated with some health benefits, including:

- reducing the risk of dying from a heart attack
- reducing the risk of blood clots and coronary artery disease
- reducing the risk of strokes, particularly ischemic strokes, which are caused by narrowing of blood vessels
- lowering the risk of gallstones
- stimulating appetite, promoting regular bowel function and improving mood, among the elderly

Perhaps the most compelling and promising benefit of moderate alcohol consumption is the reduction in fatal heart attacks. A 12-year study of 38,077 men found fewer deaths from heart attacks among men who drank up to two alcoholic drinks per day, compared to those men who did not drink at all.

The exact relationship between alcohol and reduced heart disease is unclear. Researchers suspect that alcohol may protect the heart by preventing the constriction of the coronary arteries, inhibiting clot formation, and enhancing recovery after a heart attack.

Psychological benefits of moderate drinking

Because alcohol is a central nervous system depressant, it has been used for centuries for its calming effects. Scientific studies suggest that moderate use of alcohol is associated with reduced stress, tension, feelings of anxiety and self-consciousness in many people.

Crossing the line to problem drinking and health risks

There are clear health benefits to moderate drinking. The danger lies in the fact that alcohol is a psychoactive, mood-altering and potentially addictive drug. So, the benefits of moderate drinking must be interpreted with caution: There is a fine line between moderate and problem drinking.

Anything more than moderate drinking increases the risk for a cadre of health, emotional and social problems, including:

- cirrhosis of the liver
- stroke
- heart failure
- cancer—including liver, mouth and throat, esophageal and breast cancer
- pancreatitis
- elevated triglycerides (fat) in the blood
- high blood pressure
- miscarriage
- injuries and death due to trauma from alcohol-induced impairment
- sudden death in people with current cardiovascular disease
- fetal alcohol syndrome
- depression and suicide
- anxiety disorders
- alcoholism
- fetal defects, including developmental deficits and intellectual and behavioral problems

The bottom line

Still unsure whether drinking alcohol is worth the risk? Medical professionals are not advising nondrinkers, particularly young adults, to start drinking. If you do drink and you're healthy, there's no need to stop as long as you drink responsibly and in moderation. If you have had problems with alcohol in the past, it's best to abstain.

Sources: Kenneth J. Mukamal, MD, MPH. (2003) "Roles of Drinking Pattern and Type of Alcohol Consumed in Coronary Heart Disease in Men." *The New England Journal of Medicine*, 348(2):109-118; Sobell, L.C., and Sobell, M.B. "Alcohol Consumption Measures," *Assessing Alcohol Problems: A Guide for Clinicians and Researchers*. National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism Treatment Handbook Series 4, 1995.

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