



## Health Benefits of Alcohol Depend on Drinking in Moderation

Close to two-thirds (61 percent) of American adults consider themselves drinkers, according to a new report published by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, but it seems that some of us consume alcohol because we've seen reports that it's good for our health.

There is evidence that alcohol may protect the heart and reduce the risk of stroke and Alzheimer's disease. However, Shari Midoneck, MD, with the Iris Cantor Women's Health Center at Weill Cornell Medical Center, emphasizes that these benefits are associated with moderate drinking, and recent studies confirm that binge drinking negates them.

**Keep your drinking moderate.** It's important to keep in mind that, while several studies have found an association between moderate alcohol consumption and health benefits, there are many caveats. "The most important of these is that those benefits disappear, and may even be reversed, if you start to have three or more drinks per day," Dr. Midoneck says. "You also can often gain those benefits in other, healthier ways."

For example, strong medical evidence links alcohol with a reduced risk of heart disease and/or diabetes. "However, studies also show that heart disease risk, while lower among moderate drinkers, can be substantially higher among people who drink to excess," Dr. Midoneck explains. "It's also the case with both heart



*A drink is defined as 12 ounces (355 milliliters, or mL) of beer, 5 ounces (148 mL) of wine, or 1.5 ounces (44 mL) of 80-proof distilled spirits.*

disease and diabetes that exercise and a healthy diet can help protect you."

Alcohol also is linked with better bone density, which may be due to the fact that it raises estrogen levels in women, and estrogen is important for maintaining bone health. "Older adults who drink moderately also may have a lower risk of dementia," Dr. Midoneck adds, "although it is unclear whether this is linked to alcohol's effects on cardiovascular health, or to the fact that drinking

tends to occur in social settings and socializing may be an important way to prevent dementia."

### **The downside of binge drinking.**

A 2009 study revealed that 14 percent of men and three percent of women age 65 and older report binge drinking (consuming five or more alcoholic drinks at a time), and recent evidence suggests that heavier alcohol use may actually harm your heart and interfere with your memory.

### **DOES IT MATTER WHICH TYPE OF ALCOHOL YOU DRINK?**

Some studies have associated red wine with more cardiovascular benefits than beer or spirits, and there is evidence that the prevalence of coronary heart disease is lower in countries where the Mediterranean diet, in which wine is drunk in preference to beer or spirits, is popular.

However, in practice, whether you choose beer or wine doesn't seem to affect any health benefits. Both beer and spirits also have been linked with reduced heart disease risk, and beer may also reduce the risk of cataracts. Shari Midoneck, MD, an internal medicine specialist at Weill Cornell Medical Center, says it's possible study results skew in favor of wine because wine drinkers may be more likely to eat a healthier diet. "This is a case in point in the Mediterranean region, where the typical diet prioritizes fruits, vegetables, whole grains and healthy fats," she notes.

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Alcohol is known to raise blood pressure, and research published online February 8, 2010 in the *American Journal of Epidemiology* found that regular moderate drinkers who periodically drank five or more drinks were 45 percent more likely to develop heart disease. A study published in the April 2010 issue of *Alcoholism: Clinical & Experimental Research* found that heavy alcohol use in older women was associated with memory and cognitive problems. “Other research has linked even moderate alcohol consumption to a higher risk of breast cancer due to its effect on estrogen levels, as well as liver cancer and colorectal cancer,” Dr. Midoneck cautions.

For older adults, the negative effects of alcohol are increased by the fact that aging prevents the body from metabolizing alcohol efficiently. “As a result, alcohol tends to stay in the system longer, and its intoxicating effects may be more pronounced,” says Dr. Mi-



doneck. “This can put older adults at risk of falls, and alcohol also may interact with any medications they take.” Excessive consumption also is linked with a higher risk for obesity, depression and insomnia.

**How much is too much?** Current guidelines recommend that older adults drink no

more than one alcoholic beverage a day, but if you don’t drink at all, the American Heart Association advises against starting in order to gain some of the possible benefits. “I recommend to my patients who do drink alcohol to limit themselves to three drinks a week,” says Dr. Midoneck. “This should mean that you get some benefit while minimizing the risks.”

She notes that if you have risk factors for breast cancer (for example, a family history of the disease), you

### WHAT YOU CAN DO

*If you drink alcoholic beverages:*

- Talk with your doctor about any risk factors you have that make alcohol consumption harmful.
- If you’re in the habit of drinking a nightcap to help you sleep, keep in mind that alcohol is associated with poor sleep; instead, switch to decaffeinated herbal tea.
- If you drink hard liquor, switch to wine—liquor has been associated with weaker bones more than wine or beer.

should be especially mindful of your alcohol intake. “The same is true if you have high blood pressure or a family history of the condition, or existing heart disease, particularly if you take daily aspirin, as it can cause bleeding in combination with alcohol,” she adds. 🍷