



What You Should Know About Alcohol and Heart Disease

In February, the American Heart Association leads the observation of Go Red for Women month, which draws attention to heart disease in women. But it's also a good time to consider heart health in general.

Over the past couple of decades, much media attention has been given to studies linking a reduced rate of heart attacks with drinking alcohol, especially red wine. And that was enough for some people to assume they had a green light to freely imbibe.

That is not, however, the message these studies send, say heart health experts.

Dr. David W. Crabb, chairman of the Indiana University Department of Medicine and director of the Indiana Alcohol Research Center, says the studies contain established data – and those data suggest “that moderate drinking reduces the risk of cardiovascular disease, mainly heart attacks.”

A key word here is moderate, defined as two or fewer drinks a day for men and one or fewer drinks per day for women. (Standard parameters for the equivalent of one drink are one 12-ounce beer, four ounces of wine, 1.5 ounces of 80-proof spirits or one ounce of 100-proof spirits.)

“At higher rates of consumption of alcohol than the above, there is an increase in rates of certain kinds of stroke, as well as high blood pressure,” Crabb says. “Even higher consumption rates can cause congestive heart failure, which is called alcoholic cardiomyopathy.”

On its national Web site, the American Heart Association cautions “Drinking more alcohol increases such dangers as alcoholism, high blood pressure, obesity, stroke, breast cancer, suicide and accidents. Also, it's not possible to predict in which people alcoholism will become a problem.”

And, Crabb adds, the studies don't mean a healthy young person should use the data as an excuse to indulge. “If you are, say, 25 years old, physically active and with no particular risk for heart attacks, drinking moderately doesn't reduce that risk in the ensuing decade or so, since the background risk is so low,” he explains. “So you have to have some risk of cardiovascular disease to begin with for alcohol to reduce that risk.”

Nor should the data spur nondrinkers to take up the habit.

“No one recommends that a nondrinker begin drinking to reduce their cardiovascular risk,” says Crabb. “Said another way, if alcohol were studied as a new drug, it wouldn't be approved because of

all the negative effects of overuse. However, those drinking within the moderate levels described above, and without risk factors for alcohol abuse or alcohol dependence (i.e. with a family history of alcohol problems) or for drug interactions will likely gain some benefit in the form of reduced rates of heart attacks.”

Of course, you can also work to reduce your risk of heart attacks the old-fashioned way instead. Says the AHA Web site, “How alcohol or wine affects cardiovascular risk merits further research, but right now the American Heart Association does not recommend drinking wine or any other form of alcohol to gain these potential benefits. The AHA does recommend that to reduce your risk you should talk to your doctor about lowering your cholesterol and blood pressure, controlling your weight, getting enough physical activity and following a healthy diet.”

Crabb suggests a diet high in fruits and vegetables and low in saturated fat, along with increased consumption of fish and other sources of omega 3 fatty acids. And of course, no smoking.

For more information, visit the AHA’s fact sheet titled “Alcohol, Wine and Cardiovascular Disease” at <http://www.americanheart.org/presenter.jhtml?identifier=4422>.