

Benefits and dangers of alcohol

The saying that too much of a good thing is bad is especially true for alcohol. Drinking too much alcohol causes a whole range of serious health problems, including liver disease, certain types of cancers, and heart disease, as well as alcoholism. However, research about alcohol has shown that moderate use can have some health benefits.

Researchers report in the January 6, 1999, issue of *JAMA* that moderate consumption of alcohol decreases the risk of stroke (damage to part of the brain caused by blocked blood vessels in the head or neck) but that heavy alcohol consumption increases the risk of stroke. The findings support the National Stroke Association guidelines that say drinking 1 glass of wine or beer or 1 drink each day may actually lower the risk for stroke.

Moderate drinking is defined as 1 or 2 drinks per day for men and 1 drink a day for women and those older than 65. Women and the elderly have lower levels of body water, so smaller amounts of alcohol achieve higher blood alcohol concentrations than in younger men.

ADVERSE HEALTH EFFECTS OF ALCOHOL:

- Heavy drinking increases your risk of certain disorders, such as liver cirrhosis (damage to liver cells) and pancreatitis (inflammation of the pancreas), and certain types of cancers, including cancer of the liver, mouth, throat, larynx (the voice box), and esophagus.
- Long-term health consequences of heavy drinking include loss of appetite, vitamin deficiencies, stomach ailments, digestive problems, skin problems, sexual impotence, obesity, heart and central nervous system damage, memory loss, and psychological disorders.
- Heavy drinking also increases risk of death from automobile crashes; injuries during recreation and work; higher likelihood of homicide and suicide; and harm to the fetus during pregnancy.

WHEN TO ABSTAIN FROM DRINKING:

If you:

- Are pregnant or considering pregnancy
- Have a medical condition that can be worsened by drinking, such as an ulcer or liver disease
- Have a personal or family history of alcoholism
- Are taking medication that may interact with alcohol
- Are planning to drive or engage in other activities that require you to be alert
- Are under the legal drinking age

BENEFITS OF ALCOHOL:

- Moderate alcohol consumption (1 or 2 drinks per day) may reduce your risk of coronary heart disease
- Moderate alcohol consumption also may lower your risk of stroke

WHAT TO DO:

If you have or think you have a problem with alcohol:

- Discuss the problem with your doctor and ask what level of alcohol consumption is advisable for your situation.
- Get help by contacting your doctor or support groups like Alcoholics Anonymous if you can't control the amount of alcohol you drink or if your drinking is interfering with your ability to perform daily activities or other normal functions of life.

FOR MORE INFORMATION:

- National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism
Scientific Communications Branch
301/443-3860 or www.niaaa.nih.gov
- Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration
National Clearinghouse for Alcohol and Drug Information
800/729-6686
800/487-4899 (TTY) or www.health.org
- National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence
800/NCA-CALL or www.ncadd.org
- Alcoholics Anonymous
212/870-3400 or www.alcoholics-anonymous.org

INFORM YOURSELF:

To find this and previous JAMA Patient Pages, check out the AMA's Web site at www.ama-assn.org/consumer.htm.



One drink is usually defined as a 12-ounce bottle of beer or wine cooler, a 5-ounce glass of wine, or 1.5 ounces of 80-proof distilled spirits.

Additional Sources: National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, National Clearinghouse for Alcohol and Drug Information, National Stroke Association, American Heart Association

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