

Moderate alcohol drinking: risks and benefits

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ABSTRACT

Moderate drinking generally is related to small health effects. Women are more sensitive to the effects of alcohol than men. The risk of alcohol is largest for young people and is reduced with advancing age. The benefits of drinking are the reverse: young people derive no benefit from alcohol, but from middle age onwards researchers find increasing benefits, more clearly for men than for women. Even moderate drinking is associated with some health risks however; especially foetal damage during pregnancy, certain neoplasms, liver disease, accidents, violence and hypertension. Protective effects are reported for cardiovascular disease, diabetes and cognitive functioning.

Coronary heart disease Heavy drinking clearly increases the risk for cardiovascular disease. Low to moderate drinking has no obvious harmful effects and may be protective. Alcohol consumption can not be recommended however in order to prevent cardiovascular disease.

Accidents Among young people accidents are a leading cause of death. Traffic accidents are the most common. For every increase of blood alcohol concentration by 0,02 a doubling of fatal traffic crashes are seen. Other common accidents are drownings, falls and burns. Alcohol is estimated to cause around 30 per cent of all fatal accidents.

Cancer Alcohol is related to several forms of cancer. The strongest associations are found for oro-pharyngeal and oesophageal cancers. Significant, but smaller associations are found for breast cancer, and cancer in the colon, rectum and ovaries.

Diabetes Moderate drinkers have a reduced risk by around 25 - 30 per cent for type 2 diabetes compared to non-drinkers.

Depression and suicide The rate of depression is highly increased among alcohol dependent persons. In Sweden 48 per cent of all suicides are alcohol related. Some suicides are the result of binge drinking regardless of clinical depression or alcohol dependency.

Liver and pancreas Alcohol is the leading cause of liver cirrhosis. Two glasses of wine per day is associated with a three-fold increase in liver cirrhosis. Most cases of liver cancer have been preceded by liver cirrhosis. High alcohol consumption is the leading cause of pancreatitis.

Pregnancy No lower threshold has been established for safe drinking during pregnancy. Drinking in the range 1 – 2 drinks per day has been associated with a number of effects on the foetus, and on long term neuro-psychiatric defects in the growing child.

Conclusions

- Alcohol consumption can not be recommended for health. While there is evidence that light drinking on a regular basis is associated with reduced risk for cardiovascular disease and type 2 diabetes, controlled research does not support actively encouraging patients to drink alcohol. When discussing alcohol habits with patients, equal

attention should be given to the pattern of drinking as to the volume of drinking. Individual drinking guidelines are best delivered by health professionals in the health care setting.

- The health benefits of alcohol in the population appear at low or very low levels of drinking, at the most one standard drink per day for men at age 70, and less than half a standard drink per day for women at the same age. All consumption above these levels is associated with increased risk. Below the age of 40, no substantial beneficial effects of alcohol have been seen. Drinking to intoxication is always associated with increased risk.
- On the other hand, there is no reason to discourage low-risk drinking in the adult population, provided that individual circumstances and situations have been taken into account. These include medical and social factors such as operating machinery, pregnancy, certain pharmacological treatments that may interact unfavourably with alcohol, and the risk of dependency. By low-risk drinking is meant (1) that regular consumption of alcohol is low and (2) that drinking to intoxication does not occur.