

IS DRINKING ALCOHOL HEALTHY?

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Whether or not to drink alcohol is an important question for many of us. Many of the pleasures that we know associated with companionship, sociability, dining, and the exquisite enjoyment of gourmet foods is associated with the drinking of alcoholic beverages. The question is, is alcohol good for us or bad for us? To answer that question, we have to talk about the amount of alcohol being ingested as well as other substances such as drugs which are being used. Take, for example, aspirin. If two tablets are ingested, it will improve a headache or joint pain. If five tablets a day are ingested, it will help with chronic arthritic problems and even help reverse some of the arthritic signs. However, 10 aspirin a day would likely result in internal hemorrhage and could possibly cause death. Alcohol is much the same way. A small amount to moderate amount can be healthy, but a larger amount can be the opposite. The recommended daily intake for a woman is about one glass of wine and for men about two glasses. This is because there are definite health benefits acknowledged by most researchers in the field and definite negative aspects of wine or other alcohol ingestion associated with a higher intake.

First of all, alcohol itself is classified as an “empty” calorie. This means that taken by itself, alcohol can be burned in your body for energy but robs you of other nutrients without contributing any to your body. However, if it is served with some other accompanying mix such as Bloody Mary mix, orange juice, or as red wine, it may have a lot of vitamins and antioxidants in it. Because of this, you want to choose carefully what kind of alcohol you drink. Whiskey and water only gives you the alcohol, whereas red wine has a high quantity of polyphenols, proanthocyanidins, and flavonoids which are all healthy for your body metabolism.

When alcohol is ingested, it affects your brain neurochemicals including the function of GABA (gamma-aminobutyric acid), serotonin, dopamine, choline, and nerve conduction. If too much is ingested, negative effects of these critical central nervous system functions can be seen. However, in small quantities the effects on the central nervous system can be positive, such as the pleasure in tasting wine or a drink, feeling the relaxation of alcohol, and allowing some stress reduction. It has also been shown that moderate alcohol ingestion might improve cognitive performance in aging people. This is not true in young people, and it actually may reduce cognitive performance. Consumption of alcohol by pregnant women can have significant consequences on the developing nervous system of the fetus.

It has also been shown that people who drink moderately replace some of their dietary carbohydrates with alcohol, and one can actually lose weight. However, alcohol can stimulate the appetite as well, but it is often proteins and fats which are less likely to be stored as body fat. Too much alcohol on a daily basis causes weight gain in the middle

portion of the body due to fat storage in the omentum. Unfortunately, many heavy drinkers tend to eat small amounts of food and traditionally have inferior food choices, develop liver problems, and may experience early illness or demise as a result of this. Electrolyte depletion, vitamin deficiency, and loss of body muscle mass are some of the negative health effects seen with excessive alcohol.

Folate deficiency may be seen in people who have moderate daily consumption of alcohol, and this is particularly accentuated in women. It is for this reason that only one glass of wine or one drink a day is suggested for women because it interferes with metabolism of folic acid, which then leads to a higher incidence of ovarian and breast cancer. Thiamine deficiency can occur in long-term alcohol users because this vitamin is used to metabolize the alcohol molecule. Disordered thinking, poor memory, disturbed motor coordination, and even sensation in the limbs can be diminished with thiamine deficiency. Pyridoxine deficiency, vitamin A storage problem, and loss of micronutrients such as zinc may be altered by chronic alcohol ingestion of a moderate to heavy degree.

Considering alcohol and sex, it seems in small quantities to increase the desire and not depress ability. However, in larger quantities it may increase the desire, but the ability for sexual performance may be negatively altered. In particular with teenagers considering alcohol and sex, it does increase the possibility of risky sexual behavior as it lowers some of the usual barriers to this type of behavior. This is seen frequently in this country, and so there is a high incidence of exposure to sexually transmitted diseases as well as unplanned pregnancy.

It is interesting that in this country now, the average age of a child's first drink is 12, and 20% of 12 to 20-year-olds are considered binge drinkers. This can create short-term and long-term damage in the brain processes. The frontal lobe development and refinement of pathways and connections continue up to about the age of 16, and significant alcohol ingestion prior to this can cause irreversible damage with personality disorders and impaired learning later in life. Adolescents need to drink only half as much as adults to see impairment in learning and ability.

Most of us enjoy a good glass of wine and don't want to feel guilty about it. If you are on a diet and you don't want the extra calories, it's probably good to have a wine spritzer, which would be half wine and half soda and the addition of a twist of lemon or orange. This would reduce the calories to one-half. If you are in a restaurant with a dinner party, the tendency is for waiters to continue pouring wine in your glass even though it's not empty. A good alternative to this is to let your glass completely empty before you allow more wine to be poured into it so that you can at least keep up with the amount that you're drinking. Wine or mixed drinks with nutritious mixers are the best choices, whereas straight whiskey doesn't help your nutrient intake any at all.

It seems that ingestion of alcohol falls into the same general category as food, medicine, and even physical activity. All are good in moderation, but when you begin to have excess in any of these areas you change the health patterns. I certainly enjoy wine, particularly red ones with their varied flavors, and I always think about the health

benefits of these when drinking this delightful beverage. One last thought is that when you find a substance that can give you so much pleasure, reduce your risk for heart attack or stroke, and even improve your cholesterol level, you should learn about how to drink this in the healthiest way so that you can get the most benefit from it.