

Can alcohol help your heart?

Written by Dr. Ramin Manshadi M.D
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Whether alcohol can ever be healthy is a matter of controversy. For a long time, people have believed that alcohol can be beneficial as long as it's consumed in moderation. However, is this true? In addition, should physicians ever advise patients to drink alcohol? If we do encourage our patients to drink alcohol, then will it harm or help them? The answer is very complex.

Firstly, we will examine the possible benefits of alcohol. The ways that alcohol can benefit health are actually still poorly understood. One way it might be healthy, according to some researchers, is that alcohol increases the blood's high-density lipoprotein (that is to say, the 'good' cholesterol that reduces risk of heart disease). Another way alcohol might be good for health is with antioxidants. These are found in some wines, and can help fight disease and the effects of aging, as well as assist blood vessels called arteries to function properly. Arteries are important because they carry blood from the heart to the rest of the body. When an artery is unhealthy, the first sign is that it becomes clingy and adhesive, which causes fat to stick to it and blockages. Alcohol might also help to prevent blockages by thinning the blood and stopping blood clots.

All these theories have been backed-up with what's called 'observational research'. This kind of study looks at patients who already have heart problems, and tries to determine whether alcohol was the cause. However, all scientists agree that the best type of research is a 'double blind' study with a placebo-control group. They're called double blind studies because neither the participants nor the researchers themselves know which groups the participants are in. Even though this type of study is the most reliable, it's never been done with alcohol, because it would be difficult.

There is an observational study suggesting that if a person drinks one to two drinks a day, it may reduce the chance of heart attack. However, if a person drinks more than 1-2 drinks a day, then not only is any health benefit is lost, but also the alcohol starts to harm the body instead of doing good. You might be wondering what exactly one 'drink' is. Well, a drink is any beverage that contains half an ounce of pure alcohol. This is the same amount of alcohol in a 12-ounce bottle of beer, a 4-ounce glass of wine, or a 1 and a half ounce shot of liquor, so all of these are

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considered to be one drink.

The term drink is useful because different types of alcohol – wine, beer, and spirits, for example – contain different percentages of alcohol. For example, liquor is often 40% alcohol, whereas beer is typically only 5%. By counting in drinks, we can easily count the amount of alcohol across many different types of alcoholic drinks.

To provide a balanced view, let's look at how alcohol can be harmful. Firstly, it can kill cells, and here's an example how. Some people have what's called 'hypertrophic obstructive cardiomyopathy', which means there's an overgrowth of heart muscle inside the heart which obstructs blood flow to the rest of the body. We can treat this with a procedure called 'alcohol septal ablation', where a physician inserts alcohol into the blood vessel that feeds the overgrown muscle, and the alcohol safely kills off the cells of the excessive heart muscle. This demonstrates that alcohol can kill cells it comes into contact with. But when we drink alcohol, it comes into contact with our stomach and gut cells, and is able to cause painful sores known as ulcers. In addition, if we consume alcohol in excess, it can cause liver and heart damage, eventually leading to heart failure. On top of this, alcohol is addictive, especially for people with a predisposition to dependency. Furthermore, drinking increases the danger of alcoholism, breast cancer, suicide, hypertension, obesity, stroke, and accidents. Most studies have found alcohol to be beneficial for middle aged to older individuals, and not young people in their 20s and 30s.

It's clear then that there won't be any 100% certain instruction any time soon about alcohol consumption. Nevertheless, we certainly advise the following individuals to avoid drinking alcohol: people with a personal or family history of alcoholism; persons with hypertriglyceridemia (which is where a certain type of fat builds up in the bloodstream); sufferers of pancreatitis, liver disease, certain blood disorders, heart failure, and uncontrolled hypertension; pregnant women; and finally, people on certain medications that interact with alcohol. Moreover, there is no clear evidence that young people can get healthier by drinking alcohol, so they shouldn't trick themselves into believing that by taking alcohol they're actually helping the health of their heart!

Dr. Manshadi MD, FACC, FSCAI, FAHA, FACP is among the top American cardiologists. He is the author of *The Wisdom of Heart Health*. The physician is an Interventional Cardiologist who treats patients from prevention to intervention. He is a CMA (California Medical Association) member since 2001. He is a Board-Certified physician with the American Board of Interventional Cardiology, American Board of Cardiology. He combines private practice with Academic Medicine. Presently, he serves as Associate Clinical Professor at UC Davis Medical Center and as Clinical Professor at University of the Pacific among other positions. In addition, he is the Chair of Media Relations

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for American College of Cardiology, California Chapter. The multi-faceted physician is licensed and certified in nuclear medicine, a subspecialty of radiology. In this regard, he is a member of the American Board of Nuclear Cardiology. It is noteworthy to mention that in his practice, he likes to use innovative tests. If you want to know more about Dr. Manshadi, you can click here.

[Dr. Ramin Manshadi-Cardiologist](#)

. Dr. Manshadi is our health columnist and is available to answer your questions. You can e-mail him at

drmanshadi@megadiversities.com

and the address of his official website is

www.DrManshadi.com