

Alcohol and the heart

Cardiovascular disease (a range of conditions affecting the heart and blood vessels) is one of the biggest causes of death and ill-health in the UK, killing about 43,000 people under the age of 75 every year.¹ Lots of us want to know whether alcohol is bad for the heart or not. But the answer isn't a simple 'yes' or 'no'.

What does the research say?

For many years, research has suggested that while heavy drinkers are more likely to suffer from a heart condition than moderate drinkers, non-drinkers also have an increased risk compared to moderate drinkers. In trying to make sense of this, some researchers have argued that this finding may simply be because 'non-drinkers' usually include people who have given up drinking due to other illnesses, or because they drank heavily in the past – making them more likely to be unhealthy.²

However, a number of recent studies have found that non-drinkers have an increased risk even after taking ex-drinkers into account. Most have found that the lowest level of risk for cardiovascular disease was for people who drink around 14 units per week – but the exact level found to be most beneficial has varied, and the beneficial effects may not apply to all people (for example, the UK's Chief Medical Officers' analysis finds that they only apply to women over the age of 55).^{3, 4, 5, 6}

So the research doesn't all say the same thing – but it broadly suggests low levels of alcohol consumption are linked to some reduction in the risk of particular heart conditions, for some people.

If you want to reduce your risk to a minimum, drink no more than 14 units a week, spread over several days.

Hypertension and stroke

Drinking too much alcohol can cause hypertension, also known as high blood pressure.⁷ Hypertension contributes to over 50% of cases of stroke in the UK.⁸ Alcohol can also increase your risk of developing other conditions which themselves increase the risk of stroke, such as diabetes, liver disease and atrial fibrillation. The liver produces substances which make the blood clot, so damage to the liver can increase the risk of bleeding in the brain.⁸

What about other risks?

Cardiovascular disease is, of course, only one condition that may be influenced by drinking. In the case of alcohol-related cancers, the risk increases from your first drink, and the more you drink the more the risk increases.⁹ That means that any protective effects arising from low levels of alcohol consumption have to be balanced against the risks linked to other conditions.

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What should I do?

It's not possible to say 'drinking a certain amount of alcohol will make your life longer, or shorter, by this much'. Risk just doesn't work that way, and there are too many other factors to consider.

The Chief Medical Officers (the UK's top doctors) state that if you drink no more than 14 units a week (around six pints of lager or a bottle and a half of wine) and take a few days off each week, then the overall risk of dying from any alcohol-related condition is 1 in 100. Most recent research confirms that this is about right.

Does that mean that people who don't drink should start drinking in order to live longer? No – because most people who don't drink have very good reasons for not doing so. Given moderate drinking creates other health risks, starting doing so to improve your heart health makes little sense.

www.alcoholchange.org.uk

1 British Heart Foundation (2019). Heart and circulatory disease statistics, 2019.

2 Stockwell, T. et al. (2016). Do 'moderate' drinkers have reduced mortality risk?: a systematic review and meta-analysis of alcohol consumption and all-cause mortality. *Journal of Studies on Drugs and Alcohol* 77.2.

3 Bell, S. et al. (2017). Association between clinically recorded alcohol consumption and initial presentation of 12 cardiovascular disease. *BMJ*

4 Wood, A. et al. (2018). Risk thresholds for alcohol consumption. *The Lancet*

5 O'Neill, D. et al. (2018). Association of longitudinal alcohol consumption trajectories with coronary heart disease. *BMC Medicine*

6 Department of Health (2016) Alcohol guidelines review.

7 NHS Choices (2019). High blood pressure (hypertension).

8 Stroke Association (2014). Alcohol and stroke.

9 World Cancer Research Fund (2018). Alcoholic drinks and the risk of cancer.