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To Your Health: Can A Drink A Day Keep Disease Away?

As a preventive health-care specialist, Dr. Christiana encourages patients to make nutrition a priority. But, keeping abreast of nutritional research can be a daunting challenge. Although Tv, newspapers and magazines inundate us with nutritional information these days, it's often hard to make sense of all the "sound bites," especially when the messages are contradictory or change over time. And going to the source - medical journals - can be equally as confusing for lay people, if not more so. That's why Dr. Christiana provides patients with research-based nutritional information that's easy to digest (no pun intended). By addressing one topic at a time with clear and concise explanations in "plain English," Dr. Christiana helps patients effortlessly grasp complex nutritional concepts - and learn to comfortably make related dietary modifications. This week's topic: the health benefits of moderate alcoholic consumption.

You may have heard that drinking in moderation (one to two drinks a day) promotes wellness. Moderate drinking is cited as a key factor explaining the "French Paradox" (the curious fact that the high-fat French diet does not promote the rates of heart disease triggered by lower-fat diets). But, just how does moderate alcohol consumption prevent disease? Scientists at the University of Buffalo have unraveled some clues to this ongoing mystery. It seems that drinkers have reduced odds of developing a disorder called syndrome X. This syndrome which is linked with heart disease, cancer and diabetes - is characterized by abnormal levels of cholesterol, blood pressure and blood sugar.

Research also shows that alcoholic beverages - especially red wine are brimming with disease-fighting antioxidant chemicals. These compounds destroy the free-radical molecules associated with cancer, heart disease, Alzheimer's disease and other disorders.

Read on to learn how moderate alcohol intake may stave off specific diseases.

Wine to Warm Your Heart

Moderate alcohol consumption can slash an individual's risk of death from heart disease, according to a report in *Circulation: Journal of the American Heart Association*.

Investigators followed 21,537 male physicians for 12 years. At the onset of the trial, all subjects were free of heart problems. After controlling for various risk factors of heart disease, researchers found that men who drank two to four drinks a week were 40% less likely to experience sudden cardiac death, compared with men who rarely or never drank alcohol. Men who drank five to six drinks a week had a 21 % reduced risk. In contrast, heavy drinkers who consumed more than five drinks a day exhibited an increased risk of heart maladies (*Circulation* 1999;100:944).

Another study enrolled men living in the Czech Republic. Subjects who consumed half to one liter of beer a day enjoyed a significantly lower rate of heart attack, compared with nondrinkers. However, the protective effect of the alcohol was lost in men who drank more often (*British Medical Journal* 2000;320: 1378-9).

Sip Away Stroke Risk

Light-to-moderate alcohol consumption (one to seven drinks per week) staves off stroke. One analysis followed 13,329 women for 16 years. Participants who reported drinking wine on a monthly, weekly or daily basis enjoyed a 16%, 34% and 32% lowered stroke risk, respectively. This correlation remained even after researchers controlled for various factors such as age, gender and smoking. Investigators failed to demonstrate a similar protective effect for beer or spirits. In fact, weekly beer intake boosted a person's risk of stroke by 9% (*Stroke*, 1998;29:2467).

Avoid Alzheimer's Disease

Drinking one to two alcoholic beverages per day may slash an individual's risk of Alzheimer's disease, according to a study presented at this year's World Alzheimer's Congress in Washington, DC.

The experiment matched 238 Alzheimer's patients with an equal number of non-demented controls. Compared with nondrinkers, subjects who drank one to two drinks a day enjoyed a 52% lower risk of the mindrobbing disease.

Wine Is Tops for Wellness

Although moderate consumption of any type of alcoholic beverage offers preventive effects, scientific studies reveal that wine is more effective than beer or hard liquor at warding off disease. One just-published analysis tracked 13,000 men and 11,500 women for 30 years. Subjects who drank beer or spirits showed a small reduction in risk of death from heart disease and cancer, compared with non-drinkers. However, wine drinkers enjoyed a much more significantly reduced risk.

Scientists speculate that chemicals specific to wine called flavonoids augment the preventive effects of moderate alcohol intake (*Annals of Internal Medicine* 2000;133:411-419).

Drink A Day Dangers

Although drinking in moderation appears to be healthy for most people, certain individuals should avoid alcoholic consumption. For instance, drinking may provoke cancers of the liver, esophagus, stomach, cervix and breast. So, avoid alcohol if you have a personal or family history of these types of cancer.

The possibility of addiction is the greatest danger associated with daily drinking. That's why experts warn that dependent drinkers or alcoholics and people who have struggled with any type of addiction - including drug abuse, compulsive gambling, sex addiction and compulsive shopping - should avoid alcohol altogether. A recent study conducted by the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism reveals that - among dependent drinkers alcohol consumption is never protective and likely increases the risk of death. A good rule of thumb, say addiction specialists, is that if you have any difficulty stopping after one or two drinks, the drink-a-day program isn't for you.

Here's another fact to keep in mind: Although moderate drinking promotes wellness, studies show that heavy drinking and "binge drinking" trigger disease.

"Most studies of alcohol consumption and mortality find what we call a 'J-shaped curve,'" explains Deborah A. Dawson, a National Institutes of Health statistician who specializes in alcohol's relation to wellbeing. "What this means is that light to moderate drinkers have the lowest risk of mortality - even lower than nondrinkers - and the heaviest drinkers have the highest risk."

Alcohol-Free Alternatives

Can teetotalers reap the health rewards of a drink a day and still avoid alcoholic beverages? "Sure," say scientists. Research shows that alcohol-free wine and grape juice contain heart-healthy properties similar to those of wine.

Wine's value to cardiovascular health is ascribed to chemicals called flavonoids, which produce benefits not reported for other alcoholic beverages. Whether the alcohol in wine magnifies the properties of flavonoids has been the subject of speculation - until recently. Now, a study in the American Journal of Clinical Nutrition indicates that alcohol does not enhance the role of flavonoids. In contrast, alcohol may actually inhibit their action!

As part of the study, volunteers drank either de-alcoholized wine or wine containing alcohol. Blood concentrations of catechin (a flavonoid abundant in red wine), rose sharply in both groups, but persisted for an average of 22% longer in those who drank the nonalcoholic beverage (American Journal of Clinical Nutrition 2000;71:67-74).

If alcohol-free wine doesn't appeal to your taste buds, consider sipping grape juice with your evening meal. It seems that grape juice offers many of the health benefits of wine - but without the alcohol. In one study, scientists asked 15 patients with coronary artery disease to drink a daily serving of purple grape juice. After two weeks, the subjects' blood vessels' ability to respond to increased blood flow, an indicator of arterial health, jumped 6.4%. And, the incidence of a key step in the genesis of arterial plaque (called LDL oxidation) plummeted 34.5% (Circulation 1999;100:1050-5).

Look to Your Chiropractor for Late-Breaking Nutrition Research

Your doctor of chiropractic is committed to keeping patients up-to-date with late-breaking health research. Each month, handouts like this one are produced in direct response to patients' questions on nutritional topics. Your chiropractor also incorporates nutritional advice into custom-tailored wellness plans. Want to learn more about how nutrition and the chiropractic lifestyle can help you avoid disease? Schedule an appointment for a chiropractic check-up today!

**Our purpose is to educate and adjust families toward optimal health
with natural chiropractic care.**