

Science Behind Health Benefits of Moderate Beer Consumption

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There is mounting scientific evidence that moderate consumption of beer or other alcoholic beverages -- defined by the government as one to two servings daily -- may actually have health benefits over not consuming alcohol at all.

Research conducted on the potential health benefits of beer and other alcoholic beverages will be presented in the nation's capital on Tuesday, October 10, at the Ceres® Forum "Beer: To Your Health!" a conference hosted by the University of Maryland Center for Food, Nutrition and Agriculture Policy (CFNAP). The conference is the first of its kind in the U.S. to focus on the possible health benefits of beer and will feature national and international experts on the subjects of moderate alcohol consumption and risk communication.

A new national survey, conducted by CFNAP in conjunction with the forum, reveals differences in what Americans think of as a "moderate amount." The biggest differences fall along age, gender and racial lines and about perceptions of which alcoholic beverages have health benefits. CFNAP director and leader of the study Maureen Storey will present the survey results at the October 10 forum.

Health Benefits

Most people have heard about the potential health benefits of red wine, but in the past decade hundreds of studies have been conducted

suggesting that some of the benefits derived from moderate alcohol consumption arise from the ethanol itself, making consumption of beer, wine or spirits equally beneficial.

The 2005 Dietary Guidelines for Americans cite several studies indicating that light-to-moderate alcohol consumption is linked to lower mortality from coronary heart disease, especially among men ages 45 or older and women ages 55 or older.* The Guidelines recommend that “If you choose to drink alcoholic beverages, do so in moderation,” which the Guidelines define as one drink a day for women and two for men.

“While many studies consider the health benefits of all types of alcohol relatively equal, today we are exploring whether beer makes a unique contribution beyond that attributed to other types of alcohol,” said Storey.

Survey Results

“Drinking in moderation seems like a simple message, but is it?” asked Storey. “This survey is an attempt to understand what people define as moderation and their perceptions about the health benefits of alcoholic beverages.”

The CFNAP study revealed that many people understand the definition of moderation, but perceptions vary. The results of the national telephone survey of 1,032 adults, 21 years of age or older, conducted in September, 2005, include:

- A majority of people surveyed view moderate consumption of alcohol as healthful, but almost twice as many men and more than four times as many women say wine is healthful over those who say beer has health benefits. Even fewer said moderate consumption of spirits has health benefits.

- More adult college graduates believe there are differences in the healthfulness of alcoholic beverages than do adult high school graduates or adults with less than a high school education.
- There are gender, age, income, education level and racial differences in beer consumption. For example:
 - o Significantly more men than women report drinking beer.
 - o Among men and women who drink beer, men report drinking beer about five times a month; women drink it a little less than three times a month.
 - o More adult college graduates and those with higher incomes report drinking beer than adults who did not graduate from high school and those with less income.

“Research suggests that there are health benefits from moderate consumption of beverage alcohol,” said Storey. “However, there is an enormous challenge in communicating the potential benefits of moderate alcohol consumption that does not encourage excess consumption among drinkers or encourage non-drinkers to drink alcohol. There are tremendous opportunities to help Americans understand the limits of moderate drinking that may provide some health benefits.”

The CFNAP survey was supported by a gift from the National Beer Wholesalers Association Education Foundation.

For more information on the forum “Beer: To Your Health!” see agresearch.umd.edu/CFNAP/Conferences/index.cfm .

*Corrao et al., 2004, 2000; Marmot, 2001; Mukamal and Rimm, 2001

Conclusions, Dietary Guidelines for Americans 2005

1. In middle-aged and older adults, a daily intake of one to two alcoholic beverages is associated with the lowest all-cause mortality.

2. Compared with nondrinkers, adults who consume one to two alcoholic beverages per day appear to have lower risk of coronary heart disease (CHD).
3. Compared with nondrinkers, women who consume one alcoholic beverage per day appear to have a slightly higher risk of breast cancer.
4. Relationships of alcohol consumption with major causes of death do not differ for middle-aged and elderly Americans. Among younger people, however, alcohol consumption appears to provide little, if any, health benefit; alcohol use among young adults is associated with a higher risk of traumatic injury and death.”

Source: University of Maryland

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