

Moderate drinking lowers women's risk of heart attack

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Women who regularly enjoy an alcoholic drink or two have a significantly lower risk of having a non-fatal heart attack than women who are life-time abstainers, epidemiologists at the University at Buffalo have shown.

Moderation is the key, however. Women in the study who reported being intoxicated at least once a month were nearly three times more likely to suffer a heart attack than abstainers, results showed.

One difference in the protective pattern among drinkers involved those who drank primarily liquor. Women who preferred liquor to wine experienced a borderline increase in risk of heart attack, results showed.

The study is published in the May 2007 issue of the journal *Addiction*.

"These findings have important implications, because heart disease is the leading cause of death for women," said Joan M. Dorn, Ph.D., associate professor of social and preventive medicine in the UB School of Public Health and Health Professions and first author on the study.

Women seem to have a quicker reaction to a smaller amount of alcohol, she noted: "Overdoing it is harmful, and what is too much depends on each individual. In some women, one drink can cause intoxication."

Moderate alcohol consumption has been shown to lower the risk of heart attack, but most studies have been done with men. The current study

compared alcohol drinking volume and drinking patterns of women who had been hospitalized due to a heart attack, with age-matched controls without heart problems.

Women who had a prior heart attack, coronary bypass surgery, angioplasty, angina or a previous diagnosis of cardiovascular disease were excluded from the study.

Participants -- 320 heart attack patients and 1,565 controls -- were enrolled between 1996 and 2001. Extensive information was collected on the type of beverage consumed, serving size for each beverage and number of drinks consumed during the two years prior to the heart attack, or for controls, two years prior to the interview.

The researchers computed several variables. Drinking status was categorized as lifetime abstainers (women who reported never having 12 or more drinks in their lifetime or in any 1-year period); non-current drinkers (those who didn't consume at least one drink per month during the reference period), and current drinkers.

Additional variables calculated were: total ounces of alcohol consumed; drinks per drinking day; drinking frequency; drinking primarily with food; beverage preference -- wine, beer, liquor, or some of each; and frequency of intoxication -- current drinkers who stated they drank enough to get drunk or very high, once or more a month, and less than once a month.

Results showed that in this population-based study, women who drank moderately had a significantly lower risk of heart attack than abstainers, and the benefits were greatest in women who had a drink daily. A lower risk for drinkers than abstainers also was evident in women who drank with food, as well as without, and in those who primarily drank wine or a variety of alcoholic beverages.

Similar, but weaker, associations were found when patterns and volume were analyzed among drinkers only. Among these women, drinking alcohol in moderation in general was more important than the actual amount consumed. However, getting drunk at least once a month puts women at a significantly increased risk of heart attack, negating any of alcohol's potential protective effect.

Dorn emphasized that no one should interpret these finding as a reason to begin consuming alcohol, because alcohol brings with it risks for other conditions, such as breast cancer.

"I certainly wouldn't recommend that women start drinking, but among those who do, if they are concerning about heart health, the message is that a small amount is OK."

Source: University at Buffalo

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