

Moderate alcohol consumption may help seniors keep disabilities at bay

January 15 2009

(PhysOrg.com) -- It is well known that moderate drinking can have positive health benefits — for instance, a couple of glasses of red wine a day can be good for the heart. But if you're a senior in good health, light to moderate consumption of alcohol may also help prevent the development of physical disability.

That's the conclusion of a new UCLA study, available in the online edition of the *American Journal of Epidemiology*, which found that light to moderate drinking among these seniors reduced their odds of developing physical problems that would prevent them from performing common tasks such as walking, dressing and grooming.

"If you start out in good health, alcohol consumption at light to moderate levels can be beneficial," said lead study author Dr. Arun Karlamangla, an associate professor of medicine in the division of geriatrics at the David Geffen School of Medicine at UCLA. "But if you don't start out healthy, alcohol will not give you a benefit."

The researchers based their study on data from three waves of the National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey's Epidemiologic Follow-up Study (1982, 1987 and 1992). The sample, which included 4,276 people split evenly between male and female, was about 92 percent white, with a mean age of 60.4 years.

Drinkers were classified as light to moderate if they consumed less than 15 drinks per week and less than five drinks per drinking day (less than

four per day for women). Heavy drinkers were those who consumed 15 or more drinks per week or five or more per drinking day (four or more for women). Abstainers were those who drank fewer than 12 alcoholic beverages the previous year.

Having a physical disability means having trouble performing, or being unable to perform, routine tasks such as dressing and grooming, personal hygiene, arising, eating, walking, gripping, reaching, and doing daily errands and chores. Participants were asked if they experienced no difficulty, some difficulty, much difficulty or were unable to do these activities at all when alone and without the use of aids.

At the start of the survey, 32 percent of men and 51 percent of women abstained from drinking, 51 percent of men and 45 percent of women were light to moderate drinkers, and 17 percent of men and 4 percent women were heavy drinkers.

No one had any disabilities at the outset, but 7 percent died and 15 percent became disabled over five years.

The researchers found that light to moderate drinkers in good health had a lower risk for developing new disabilities, compared with both abstainers and heavy drinkers.

In unadjusted analyses, light to moderate drinkers had a 17.7 percent chance of becoming disabled or dying in five years, compared with 26.7 percent for abstainers and 21.4 percent for heavy drinkers. Among survivors, the risk for new disability was 12.5 percent for light to moderate drinkers, compared with 20 percent for abstainers and 15.6 percent for heavy drinkers.

However, after controlling for confounding variables such as age, smoking, exercise, heart attacks and strokes, the benefits of alcohol

consumption were seen only in seniors who rated their health as good or better: There was a 3 to 8 percent reduction in the odds of developing disability with each additional drink per week in older men and women in good or better health who were not heavy drinkers, but there was no such benefit seen in those who rated their health as fair or poor.

"Light to moderate alcohol consumption appears to have disability prevention benefits only in men and women in relatively good health," the researchers wrote. "It is possible that those who report poor health have progressed too far on the pathway to disability to accrue benefits from alcohol consumption and that alcohol consumption may even be deleterious for them."

Other study authors were Catherine A. Sarkisian, Deborah M. Kado, Howard Dedes, Diana H. Liao, Sungjin Kim, David B. Reuben, Gail A. Greendale and Alison A. Moore, all of the David Geffen School of Medicine. Sarkisian is also affiliated with the Geriatric Research Education and Clinical Center of the Veterans Affairs Greater Los Angeles Healthcare System.

Provided by University of California - Los Angeles

Citation: Moderate alcohol consumption may help seniors keep disabilities at bay (2009, January 15) retrieved 24 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2009-01-moderate-alcohol-consumption-seniors-disabilities.html>

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