

# Drinking wine lowers risk of Barrett's esophagus, precursor to esophageal cancer

March 2 2009

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Drinking one glass of wine a day may lower the risk of Barrett's Esophagus by 56 percent, according to a new study by the Kaiser Permanente Division of Research in the March issue of *Gastroenterology*. Barrett's Esophagus is a precursor to esophageal cancer, the nation's fastest growing cancer with an incidence rate that's jumped 500 percent in the last 30 years.

Barrett's Esophagus affects 5 percent of the population and occurs when heartburn or acid reflux permanently damages the esophageal lining. People with Barrett's Esophagus have a 30- to 40-fold higher risk of developing esophageal adenocarcinoma (a type of esophageal cancer) because the Barrett's Esophagus cells can grow into cancer cells.

Because there are no symptoms or warning signs of Barrett's Esophagus, people discover they have Barrett's Esophagus when an endoscopy for anemia, heartburn or a bleeding ulcer reveals esophageal cells that were damaged, then changed form during the healing process. Currently nothing can be done to treat Barrett's Esophagus; it can only be monitored.

This is the first and largest population-based study to examine the connection between alcohol consumption and risk of Barrett's Esophagus. Funded in part by the National Institutes of Health, the Kaiser Permanente study looked at 953 men and women in Northern California between 2002 and 2005 and found that people who drank one or more glasses of red or white wine a day had less than half the risk (or

56 percent reduced risk) of Barrett's Esophagus. There was no reduction of Barrett's Esophagus risk among people who drank beer or liquor.

"The rate of esophageal adenocarcinoma in this country is skyrocketing yet very little is known about its precursor, Barrett's Esophagus. We are trying to figure out how to prevent changes that may lead to esophageal cancer." said Douglas A. Corley, MD, a Kaiser Permanente gastroenterologist and the study's principal investigator.

The study findings are echoed by two other studies published in the same issue of the *Gastroenterology* journal: Australian researchers found that people who drank wine were at a lower risk of esophageal adenocarcinoma, and Irish researchers found that people who drank wine were at a lower risk for esophagitis, an irritation of the esophagus that follows chronic heartburn and often precedes Barrett's Esophagus and cancer.

Researchers are not certain why wine reduces the risk of Barrett's Esophagus and esophageal cancer. One theory is that the wine's antioxidants neutralize the oxidative damage caused by gastroesophageal reflux disease, a risk factor for Barrett's Esophagus. Another theory is that wine drinkers typically consume food with their wine as opposed to drinking straight liquor without food, thereby reducing the potentially damaging effect of alcohol on esophageal tissue, said Ai Kubo, MD, an epidemiologist at Kaiser Permanente and lead author on the study. "But we cannot preclude the possibility that wine drinking is a proxy for other 'health-seeking' behavior," Kubo added.

This study is part of larger, case-controlled Kaiser Permanente study led by Dr. Corley that looked at abdominal obesity and consumption of dietary antioxidants, fruits and vegetables in connection with Barrett's Esophagus. It found that people can reduce their risk of Barrett's Esophagus by eating eight servings of fruits and vegetables a day and

maintaining a normal body weight.

"My advice to people trying to prevent Barrett's Esophagus is: keep a normal body weight and follow a diet high in antioxidants and high in fruits and vegetables," Corley said. "We already knew that red wine was good for the heart, so perhaps here is another added benefit of a healthy lifestyle and a single glass of wine a day."

Researchers noted, though, that the protective effect of wine in terms of preventing Barrett's Esophagus was greatest with just one or two glasses a day. The protective effect of wine did not increase with higher consumption.

"It's not actually clear that treating the acid reflux will necessarily prevent getting someone from getting Barrett's Esophagus," said Dr. Corley. "The best way to prevent reflux is to maintain a normal weight."

Source: Kaiser Permanente

Citation: Drinking wine lowers risk of Barrett's esophagus, precursor to esophageal cancer (2009, March 2) retrieved 20 March 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2009-03-wine-lowers-barrett-esophagus-precursor.html>

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