

Half a unit of alcohol a day best for health: study

May 31 2012



A 175 ml glass of wine contains around 2 units, while pint of beer contains 2 to 3 units.

(Medical Xpress) -- Cutting the amount we drink to just over half a unit a day could save 4,600 lives a year in England, according to a modelling study by Oxford University researchers published in the journal [BMJ Open](#).

Half a unit of [alcohol](#) is as little as a quarter of a [glass of wine](#), or a quarter of a pint. That's much lower than current government recommendations of between 3 to 4 units a day for men and 2–3 units for women.

The researchers set out to find the optimum daily amount of alcohol that would see fewest deaths across [England](#) from a whole range of diseases connected to drink. Previous studies have often looked at the separate effects of alcohol on [heart disease](#), liver disease or cancers in isolation.

"Although there is good evidence that moderate [alcohol consumption](#) protects against heart disease, when all of the chronic disease risks are balanced against each other, the optimal consumption level is much lower than many people believe," says lead author Dr. Melanie Nichols of the BHF Health Promotion Research Group in the Department of Public Health at Oxford University.

The team used a mathematical model to assess what impact changing average alcohol consumption would have on deaths from 11 conditions known to be at least partially linked to drink.

These included coronary heart disease, stroke, high blood pressure, diabetes, cirrhosis of the liver, epilepsy, and five cancers. Over 170,000 people in England died from these 11 conditions in 2006, and ill health linked to alcohol is estimated to cost the NHS in England £3.3 billion every year.

The researchers used information from the 2006 General Household Survey on levels of alcohol consumption among adults in England. They combined this with the disease risks for differing levels of alcohol consumption as established in large analyses of published research.

They found that just over half a unit of alcohol a day was the optimal level of consumption among current drinkers.

They calculate this level of drinking would prevent around 4,579 premature deaths, or around 3% of all deaths from the 11 conditions.

The number of deaths from heart disease would increase by 843, but this would be more than offset by around 2,600 fewer cancer deaths and almost 3,000 fewer liver cirrhosis deaths.

"Moderating your alcohol consumption overall, and avoiding heavy-drinking episodes, is one of several things, alongside a healthy diet and regular physical activity, that you can do to reduce your risk of dying early of chronic diseases," says Dr. Nichols.

She adds: "We are not telling people what to do, we are just giving them the best balanced information about the different health effects of alcohol consumption, so that they can make an informed decision about how much to drink.

"People who justify their drinking with the idea that it is good for heart disease should also consider how alcohol is increasing their risk of other chronic diseases. A couple of pints or a couple of glasses of wine per day is not a healthy option.'

Although this study in *BMJ Open* did not look at patterns of drinking, Dr. Nichols says: "Regardless of your average intake, if you want to have the best possible health, it is also very important to avoid episodes of heavy drinking ("binge drinking") as there is very clear evidence that this will increase your risks of many diseases, as well as your risk of injuries."

Provided by Oxford University

Citation: Half a unit of alcohol a day best for health: study (2012, May 31) retrieved 26 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2012-05-alcohol-day-health.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private

study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.