

Light-to-moderate drinking good for your heart, researchers say

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People who drink wine, liquor or beer regularly are less prone to heart failure and heart attacks than those who rarely or never drink. Three to five drinks a week can be good for your heart.

Drinking a little [alcohol](#) every day may be part of a healthy lifestyle, according to Imre Janszky, a professor of social medicine at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU). He says alcohol does more good than harm for your heart when consumed in moderation.

And, Janszky says, it doesn't matter much whether you drink wine,

liquor or beer.

"It's primarily the alcohol that leads to more good cholesterol, among other things. But alcohol can also cause higher blood pressure. So it's best to drink moderate amounts relatively often," he says.

Decreased risk with each additional serving

Along with a number of colleagues from NTNU and the Karolinska Institute in Stockholm, Janszky has published two studies regarding the relationship between alcohol and heart health. One, published in the January 15 issue of the *International Journal of Cardiology*, is about heart failure. The second, from September 2015, is on [acute myocardial infarction](#) (AMI), and has been published in the *Journal of Internal Medicine*.

In both cases, research shows that people who regularly drink alcohol have better cardiovascular health than those who consume little or no alcohol.

The studies showed that those who drank three to five drinks per week were 33 per cent less prone to heart failure than those who abstained or drank infrequently. In the case of heart attacks, the risk appears to be reduced by 28 percent with each additional one-drink increment.

This does not surprise the researchers at all.

A majority of researchers worldwide seem to think three to five drinks a week can be good for your heart.

Different drinking patterns

"The relationship between alcohol and [heart health](#) has been studied in many countries, including the USA and southern European nations. The conclusions have been the same, but the drinking patterns in these countries are very different than in Norway. In countries like France and Italy, very few people don't drink," says Janszky. "It raises the question as to whether earlier findings can be fully trusted, if other factors related to non-drinkers might have influenced research results. It may be that these are people who previously had [alcohol problems](#), and who have stopped drinking completely," he says.

For this reason, the researchers wanted to examine the theory with a Norwegian population where a significant population drinks rarely or not at all. In the myocardial infarction study, 41 per cent of participants reported that they did not drink at all or that they consumed less than half of one alcoholic beverage per week.

Both studies are based on the longitudinal HUNT 2 Nord-Trøndelag Health Study conducted between 1995 and 1997.

The greater the drinking frequency, the lower the risk

The study, which looked at the relationship between heart failure and alcohol, followed 60,665 participants who enrolled in the HUNT study between 1995-1997 and who had no incidence of heart failure at that time. Of those, 1588 of them developed heart failure during the period of the study, which ended in 2008. The risk was highest for those who rarely or never drank alcohol, and for those who had an alcohol problem.

The more often participants consumed alcohol within normal amounts, the lower their risk of heart failure turned out to be. Those who drank five or more times a month had a 21 per cent lower risk compared to non-drinkers and those who drank little, while those who drank between one and five times a month had a two per cent lower risk.

Drinking isn't necessary for a healthy heart

"I'm not encouraging people to drink alcohol all the time. We've only been studying the heart, and it's important to emphasize that a little alcohol every day can be healthy for the heart. But that doesn't mean it's necessary to drink alcohol every day to have a healthy heart," says Janszky.

In the [heart attack](#) study, 58,827 participants were categorized by how much and how often they drank. 2966 of the participants experienced an acute [myocardial infarction](#) (AMI) between 1995 and the end of 2008. The adjusted analyses showed that each additional one-drink increment decreased the risk of AMI by 28 percent.

Alcohol may increase other problems

The researchers stressed that few participants in the study drank particularly much, so they cannot conclude that high alcohol intake protects against heart attack or [heart failure](#). They also encourage looking at the findings in a larger context, since the risk of a number of other diseases and social problems can increase as a result of higher alcohol consumption.

For example, the researchers observed that the risk of dying from various types of cardiovascular disease increased with about five drinks a week and up, while those who drank more moderate amounts had the lowest risk. High alcohol consumption was also strongly associated with an increased risk of death from liver disease.

More information: Katalin Gémes et al. Light-to-moderate drinking and incident heart failure—the Norwegian HUNT study, *International Journal of Cardiology* (2016). [DOI: 10.1016/j.ijcard.2015.10.179](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijcard.2015.10.179) K.

Gémes et al. Alcohol consumption is associated with a lower incidence of acute myocardial infarction: results from a large prospective population-based study in Norway, *Journal of Internal Medicine* (2015). DOI: [10.1111/joim.12428](https://doi.org/10.1111/joim.12428)

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