



“Alcohol is a part of our societal culture. Used wisely it can be both enjoyable and healthy but like most messages in life- moderation is the key.”

WINE OR WHY NOT?

I repeatedly get asked if alcohol and especially red wine is good for the heart. As an avid scotch and wine drinker myself, the answer is obviously yes! Unfortunately, nothing is quite that simple. So let's review the data on alcohol.

Initial interest in the beneficial effects of wine came from what is called the “French Paradox”. Although somewhat discredited now, the question of why the French, who consume high quantities of fat had lower incidence of heart disease, led to the theory that wine with a meal neutralized the ill effects of oxidant rich foods such as fats. Multiple higher quality studies have since shown alcohol to be a protective factor for the heart. The large INTERHEART study identified three protective risk factors for heart disease and they include—daily vegetable and fruit intake, regular exercise and moderate alcohol intake. By moderate we mean two (2) normal glasses of wine (5 ounces) or beer (12 ounces) or two (2) shots (1.5 ounces) of alcohol for men and half that for women, per

day. Sadly, they cannot be saved up for weekend consumption alone!

Alcohol's beneficial effects come from raising the good cholesterol (HDL), thinning the blood, reducing stress, lowering blood pressure and providing natural antioxidants (flavonoids seen in red grapes). Multiple attempts at providing the key flavonoid – a polyphenol called resveratrol as a dietary supplement have been unsuccessful at providing any benefit. However, drinking pure grape juice does have some benefit although not as much as red wine. This again supports the concept that it is always better to consume the antioxidant rich food or drink rather than any concentrated pill supplement.

Alcohol may also have other benefits such as living longer especially as part of the Mediterranean diet. Alcohol can improve your libido, strengthen your immune system to common colds, reduce gallstones, lower the chances of dementia or diabetes.

The American Heart Association states that

even though alcohol has beneficial properties if you don't drink it is NOT recommended to start. Alcohol in excess has many detrimental effects. It can impair judgment and is a leading risk factor for motor vehicle accidents that can result in injury to self or others. It can lead to dependency, alcoholism and social breakdown. Alcohol in excess can raise triglycerides (fats), blood pressure and strokes. While alcohol lowers blood sugar, most alcoholic drinks come with a lot of excess carbohydrates—resulting in the famous beer belly! Excess alcohol can also weaken heart muscle, cause arrhythmias and be toxic to the fetus.

If you are taking medications check with your health care professional about potential drug interactions especially with certain blood thinners such as warfarin. Patients with liver disease or pancreatitis must also abstain from alcohol as should pregnant mothers.

Alcohol is a part of our societal culture. Used wisely it can be both enjoyable and healthy but like most messages in life- moderation is the key. As the saying goes- please drink responsibly! ■



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