

Is Moderate Drinking Really Safe Drinking?

Adults are advised to be cautious when consuming alcohol and consider their personal situation before deciding to drink. Contacting your health care provider before changing drinking patterns can help to prevent problems. Remember that a healthy diet, avoidance of smoking, and maintenance of an appropriate level of physical activity and weight can help to maintain a strong heart, as well as enhance one's outlook.

Recent Reports

- The Bureau of Substance Abuse Services cautions Massachusetts residents to consider their personal circumstance as well as the potential for negative effects before consuming alcohol.
- Studies may show that "light or moderate drinkers have lower rates of coronary heart disease than abstainers." Yet this doesn't tell the whole story.¹

Facts to Consider

- Factors such as a healthy diet, physical activity, avoidance of smoking, and maintenance of a healthy weight will help to reduce the risk of heart disease.
- An Addiction Specialist and Senior Scientist at the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health at the University of Toronto states that "the health benefits of alcohol use are generally overstated and are virtually non-existent for young people. Even small amounts of alcohol increase the risk of injury and boost the chances of developing about sixty diseases."²
- The World Health Organization suggests that when differences relating to the individual's social and economic position are corrected, the seeming cardio-protective effects may no longer be found.³
- The most recent studies do not necessarily account for crucial, personal differences which greatly affect how alcohol reacts to the body. (See Personal Factors below.)
- Adults should talk to their health care providers before changing their drinking habits.

What Personal Factors Contribute to Reactions with Alcohol?

- **Gender**
Moderate drinking levels differ for men and women. This is because women's bodies process alcohol differently, and they are more sensitive to alcohol use.⁴
- **Age**
There are no safe limits of alcohol use for youth or adolescents. Consumption of alcohol under the age of 21 is illegal. Older adults, in addition, are much more sensitive to alcohol intake.²
- **Personal and Family History**
People with a personal or family history of alcohol problems or alcoholism must be especially cautious as they may not be able to drink alcohol safely.
- **Medication Intake**

Alcohol can interact with some prescription and over-the-counter medication. It is essential to ask individual health care providers before changing drinking patterns.⁵

- **Pregnancy**

Alcohol consumption during pregnancy can seriously affect the mental and physical development of the unborn baby. According to the Health and Nutrition Newsletter of Tufts University, alcoholic beverages should not be consumed by women of childbearing age who may become pregnant or pregnant and lactating women.⁶

What is “Moderate Drinking”?

- According to the World Health Organization, “there may be some danger that talking about a ‘safe limit’ (for alcohol use) will encourage more of the population to drink and spur light drinkers to drink up to the stated limit.”³
- Moderate drinking levels are generally defined as no more than one drink per day for women (under age 65) and no more than two drinks per day for men (under 65). These limits are based on differences between the sexes in both weight and metabolism.⁴
- Elderly (above age 65) should limit alcohol intake because their bodies process alcohol differently. The maximum limits of drinks a day for men over 65 is 1 drink per day, and for women over 65 is less than one per day.⁵
- There are no safe limits for alcohol use by youth.
- People with certain diseases, or who are taking over-the-counter or prescription medication should check with their pharmacist or health care provider, as even low levels of alcohol use may cause a reaction.
- The personal factors listed above can change the effects of even moderate levels of alcohol use.

What Are Potential Consequences of Alcohol Use?

Health Related Problems⁶

- liver cirrhosis
- elevated blood pressure
- variety of types of cancer
- stroke
- damage to unborn children.

Social, Legal and Safety Issues

- increased risk of family, work and other problems
- negative behavior modeling (parents setting examples for youth)
- absenteeism, low productivity
- financial hardship
- criminal behavior
- violence and/or accidental death
- driving under the influence of alcohol

Society at Large

- “In addition to the potential individual consequences of increased alcohol consumption, the public may suffer from the promotion of moderate drinking.”⁷
- “Although drinking is a personal act and an individual responsibility, it is also behavior shaped by our societies and something for which society as a whole has responsibility.”⁷
- According to the World Health Organization, “measures that influence drinkers in general will also have an impact on heavier drinkers. Promoting increased levels of moderate drinking may in turn increase overall consumption, even for those who should not do so.”³

References

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- ⁴ The World Health Organization. The Issue. *Health Evidence Network*. 2005.
- ⁵ Massachusetts Department of Public Health, Bureau of Substance Abuse Services and Bureau of Family and Community Health, The Massachusetts Health Promotion Clearinghouse of The Medical Foundation. *Healthy Aging: Medications and Alcohol*.
- ⁶ Dietary Guidelines for Americans, 2005. Retrieved from: www.health.gov 2/16/05.
- ⁷ Edwards, Griffith. Alcohol policy: securing a positive impact on health. Retrieved from: www.euro.who.int/mediacentre/PressBackgrounders/2001/20011002_2 1/26/05.