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RE: Pros and Cons of Moderate Alcohol Consumption Debated by Docs

Carey B. Health officials send mixed messages on alcohol. *Austin American-Statesman*. April 15, 2001:K13.

According to this article, originally from the *Los Angeles Times*, concern about potential alcohol abuse may have led some health officials to downplay studies indicating its benefits in increasing good cholesterol levels and possibly guarding against heart disease.

Over the past ten years, research has found that moderate alcohol drinkers, who have one or two drinks a day, are 20 to 30 percent less likely to develop heart disease than those who drink rarely or never. Over 60 studies from many countries show similar results. Recent trials show that a drink or two daily raises the level of good (HDL) cholesterol by about 12 percent, with a resultant 20 to 25 percent drop in heart disease risk. This cardioprotective effect is as well documented, according to Dr. Meir Stampfer, professor of nutrition and epidemiology at the Harvard School of Public Health, as those of other lifestyle factors such as eating fiber or exercising regularly.

Yet the American Heart Association (AHA) has issued a strong warning against drinking, discounting the "popular but unproven" idea that red wine protects against heart disease. And last year, health officials in France challenged the so-called French paradox, the theory that drinking wine with meals contributes to France's low rate of heart disease.

Researchers say such statements are due more to politics than science. About 70 percent of adult Americans drink on occasion, and about 15 percent of regular drinkers experience serious problems, ranging from alcoholism to auto accidents, depression, suicide, liver disease, and cardiomyopathy. The AHA's condemnation of drinking blurs the distinction between moderate and heavy drinking, showing a "reluctance to trust the public with good news about a substance that causes so much harm when abused." Dr. Edward Fisher, a heart disease researcher at Mt. Sinai School of Medicine, who co-wrote the AHA report, said that it "errs on the conservative side because the benefits of light drinking aren't absolutely proven for everybody."

Indeed, researchers acknowledge that it is not "absolutely proven" that alcohol causes the observed reduced risk, and some other factors, such as genetics or healthier diets, may be at work in moderate drinkers. The improved HDL levels are, however, considered direct evidence.

A study in 2000 by Stampfer and Dr. Eric Rimm, also of Harvard, found that people could reduce their risk of heart disease up to 82 percent by making five lifestyle changes, of which drinking moderately was one. Rimm said that health officials may fear that endorsing alcohol consumption could lead people to ignore other healthy changes they can make, such as eating fruits and vegetables and losing weight, in favor of alcohol alone.

The one clearly documented risk of moderate drinking is an increased risk of breast cancer. However, after menopause, the risk of heart disease becomes greater than that of breast cancer, complicating the equation for women.

—*Mariann Garner-Wizard*

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