



The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

Bowles Center for Alcohol Studies

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But I heard drinking was good for my health!

In 1991, the CBS news program 60 Minutes ran a story called "The French Paradox" which suggested that drinking alcohol, or at least red wine, reduced the risk of heart disease. Many people considered this a medical recommendation to drink.

Epidemiological studies indicate that moderate drinkers live longer than non-drinkers and heavy drinkers. The reasons are not clear. A number of other lifestyle factors could be involved. People who do not drink should not start for health reasons. People who drink more than two drinks a day should cut back. Proper diet and exercise are safe alternatives to improve cardiovascular health. Moderate drinking may have some benefits, but it also carries increased health risks.

What is moderate drinking?

The U.S. Department of Agriculture and Department of and Health and Human Services define moderate drinking as **no more than:**

- **one drink a day for women and people over 60**
- **two drinks a day for men** (no more than one an hour).

They recommend **the following people should not drink at all:**

- women who are pregnant or trying to conceive
- people who plan to drive or engage in other activities that require attention or skill
- people taking medication, including over-the-counter medications
- recovering alcoholics
- people under the age of 21.

A daily rather than weekly amount is suggested. It's healthier to drink a small amount daily than to binge (more than 4 drinks for men, more than 3 for women) on weekends or special occasions.

Health benefits of moderate drinking

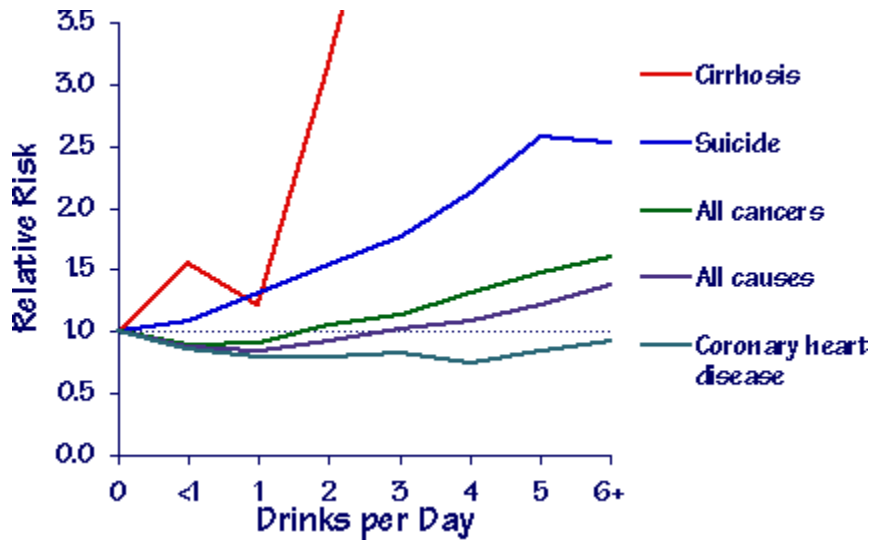
- Psychological - stress reduction
- Cardiovascular - reduction in risk of coronary artery disease
- Increased appetite - especially in the elderly

Health risks of moderate drinking

- increased risk of accidents
- strokes caused by bleeding
- medication interactions - including non-prescription drugs
- breast cancer - alcohol increases estrogen levels, which is a risk for premenopausal women
- birth defects - fetal alcohol effect (FAE) and low birth weight
- heavier drinking - many people, such as recovering alcoholics, can't maintain moderation

A Study on Drinking and Health Risks

While drinking can lower the risk of cardiovascular disease, it does increase other health risks. In the following chart, mortality rates for non-drinkers serve as the baseline health risk (1.0 on the vertical axis). The risk for coronary heart disease even for heavy drinkers remains below the baseline; but risk of death from other causes goes up. The risk of death from liver disease skyrockets off the chart after only a couple of drinks a day.



Source: Bofetta, P, and Garfinkel, L. "Alcohol drinking and mortality among men enrolled in an American Cancer Society prospective study." *Epidemiology* 1:342-348, 1990.



Bowles Center for Alcohol Studies
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
CB#7178, Thurston Bowles Building
Chapel Hill, NC 27599-7178
Tel: (919) 966-5678 • Fax: (919) 966-5679

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