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The Health Benefits of Alcohol

By Jocelyn Voo

Red wine has long been touted as the drink du jour of health-conscious imbibers, but cocktail and beer lovers take note: It turns out that all alcohol has its upsides.

Healthy Hard Alcohol?

Drinking moderate amounts of any kind of alcohol -- be it beer, wine, or hard liquor -- will raise your good HDL cholesterol levels, says **Lisa Young, adjunct professor of nutrition at New York University and author of The Portion Teller Plan.** "That's a really big benefit to the people who do have cholesterol problems because it is hard to elevate your good cholesterol," she says.

The downside? Drinking all types of alcohol will also increase your risk for certain cancers, such as breast and liver cancer. In fact, a September study showed that women who averaged one to two drinks per day raised their risk for breast cancer by 10 percent, and those who drank three drinks a night raised their risk by as much as 30 percent. Risk for other illnesses, such as heart disease, cirrhosis of the liver, heart muscle damage, and stroke are also correlated with excessive alcohol consumption.

If a woman is pregnant, drinking can also lead to miscarriage or fetal alcohol syndrome in an unborn child, which can impair growth and nervous system development.

Calorie Comparison

According to the USDA, a 1.5-ounce shot of 80 proof distilled spirits (gin, rum, vodka, whiskey) contains approximately 96 calories. Calorie counts for mixed drinks vary wildly, clocking in at anywhere from 280 calories for a gin and tonic to over 800 calories for some frozen, creamy drinks. Opt for cocktails made with calorie-free mixers, such as Diet Coke and soda water, which are easier on the waistline.

The Better Side of Beer

If you thought beer was just for baseball games and frat parties, think again!

According to a letter in medical journal *The Lancet*, beer consumption may actually protect against heart disease. Beer contains vitamin B6, which prevents the buildup of homocysteine, a chemical linked with heart disease

Moreover, studies have shown that one serving of beer provides roughly the same amount of heart-healthy antioxidant protection as red wine, and that consuming moderate amounts of beer lowers one's chances of coronary heart disease by 30-40 percent, compared to those who don't kick back with the occasional brew.

Calorie Comparison

Light beer tallies about 108 calories for 12 ounces, while regular beer rings in about 144 calories. If you're a beer-drinker who's watching her weight, opt for light beer. **"Light beer will cut the calories, so if you're going to do something lighter, look for light as opposed to low-carb,"** advises Young. **"The low-carb beer will give you the same calories as the regular."**

Your Overall Intake: What You Need to Know

Though there is no universally accepted standard drink definition, in the U.S., one drink is usually considered to be 12 ounces of beer, 5 ounces of wine, or 1 1/2 ounces of hard alcohol.

If you choose to drink, moderation is key. "The benefits that you get come from moderate amounts, which are one to two drinks a day," says Young. **"You can't save up and binge drink on the weekends. You're going to either use it or lose it."**

Moreover, alcohol does have addictive properties, so if your family history has been prone to such problems, it's probably best to abstain from it entirely.

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Drink to Your Health: The Heart-Healthy Benefits of Wine

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By Jocelyn Voo

Red wine: The drink of choice for gourmets and connoisseurs, pretentious poseurs, and, lately, the health-conscious set. White and sparkling wines have started to seem like the ugly stepsisters of their scarlet sibling, but we're here to tell you that they, too, have their health benefits.

How It's Made

When making wine, "you're basically converting sugar to alcohol," says Rodney Schatz, a third-generation grape farmer and chairman of the California Association of Winegrape Growers. To make red wine, red grapes are harvested at a certain Brix level, which indicates the percentage of sugar in the grape. Grapes are then crushed and left to ferment in a tank with added yeasts. To extract the desired tannins, colors, and flavors, temperature is controlled and the speed of fermentation is manipulated as juice is pumped over the skins.

White winemaking applies the same basic process as that of red wine, except the grape skins are removed before fermentation. "You're not looking for flavor from the skin, as you are with the red," explains Schatz. "You're looking for more flavor from the meat of the grape."

To make sparkling wine, such as Champagne, "you're taking finished wine and you're refermenting it," says Schatz. During the normal fermentation process, carbon dioxide is naturally given off to the air. During the second fermentation of sparkling wine in the bottle, the carbon dioxide is not released, giving the drink its natural effervescence.

Red vs. White vs. Sparkling

Red wine naturally contains phytochemicals. Two types of polyphenols -- catechins and resveratrol, found in the skin and seeds of grapes -- are thought to give red wine its antioxidant heart-healthy properties. The antioxidants in wine, called flavonoids, also reduce the risk of coronary heart disease by reducing bad LDL cholesterol, boosting good HDL cholesterol, and reducing blood clotting. One study even suggests that resveratrol may inhibit tumor growth for some cancers.

So how do all the different wines stack up against each other? "Red has more antioxidants than white, rose has similar to red, and there's not really any antioxidants in Champagne," says Lisa Young, adjunct professor of nutrition at New York University and author of *The Portion Teller Plan*. Since polyphenol level is rooted in the grape skin, red wine holds superior to lighter-tinted wines -- though white wine does have some cardio-protective benefits. But while their antioxidant count is diminished, white wines retain the ability to reduce bad LDL cholesterol.

The Health Risks Involved

Before you think wine's antioxidant properties are reason enough to toast every celebration, know this: In September of 2007, U.S. researchers announced that an average of three or more drinks a day -- be it wine, beer, or hard alcohol -- can raise a woman's risk of breast cancer as much as smoking a pack of cigarettes. Ethyl alcohol, present in all booze, is the suspected culprit. Studies showed that women who consumed one or two drinks a day upped their risk for breast cancer by 10 percent, while those who consumed three or more drinks a day raised their risk by as much as 30 percent.

Calorie Comparison

Wine takes the prize as one of the lowest-calorie alcoholic beverages per serving. For a 5-ounce serving, red wine rings in at approximately 105 calories. White wine contains about 100. Three ounces of dessert wine, on the other hand, racks up 141 calories -- so continue to mind your after-dinner drink count.

If you're really watching your waistline, consider cutting calories with a wine spritzer. "If you mix wine with sparkling water, which has zero calories, in a way you're getting more bang for your buck," says Young. Twice the drink for the same number of calories? Sign us up!

So, Glass Half Empty or Half Full?

The bottom line: When it comes to drinking for your health, moderation is key. The USDA defines moderation as up to one drink a day for women. In the case of wine, that means 5 ounces.

And teetotalers don't have to miss out on the heart-healthy benefits just for staying dry. **"You don't have to drink red wine; you can have the grapes, too," Young explains. In fact, one study indicated that purple grape juice offers the same heart-healthy benefits as red wine.**

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