

Frequent Drinking Lowers Chance of Heart Attack, Study Shows

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Men who drink at least three times a week may be less likely to develop heart disease than are nondrinkers and less-frequent drinkers -- regardless of whether they prefer beer, wine or spirits, according to a new study from Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center in Boston.

Numerous studies have found that moderate alcohol consumption can help prevent heart disease, but the roles of drinking patterns and type of beverage were unclear. The latest research indicates that how often you drink may be more important than how much or what you drink.

The findings "imply that ethanol, per se, is the active agent" in reducing heart disease, said lead researcher Dr. Kenneth Mukamal, who had conducted an earlier study that concluded that moderate consumption of alcohol after a heart attack [lowered the chances of having another](#). However, he said, "whether red wine has particular benefits for other conditions remains an interesting area of investigation." Wine -- particularly the polyphenols in red wine -- has been linked to reduced risk of dementia and some forms of cancer, among other things.

Alcohol helps prevent heart attacks by raising levels of HDL, the good cholesterol, but also by acting as a blood thinner, explained Mukamal, who is a physician at Beth Israel Deaconess and a professor at Harvard Medical School. "It is likely that the effects of alcohol on platelets [protoplasmic disks in blood that assist in clotting] are short-lived, so frequent use of moderate amounts may keep the blood thin and prevent clots from forming in clogged arteries."

The study, which appeared in the Jan. 9 issue of *The New England Journal of Medicine*, examined the drinking habits of more than 38,000 male health-care professionals between 1986 and 1998. Every four years, the men filled out questionnaires on how often they drank, how much they drank per day, what type of alcoholic beverages they consumed and whether they typically consumed alcohol with meals. One drink was considered a 4-ounce glass of wine, one shot of liquor or a 12-ounce beer.

The men were then categorized according to their drinking frequency: nondrinkers, less than once a week, one or two days a week, three or four days a week, and five to seven days per week.

During the 12 years of the study, more than 1,400 heart attacks occurred. There were 188 cases among men who drank three to four days per week, followed by 388 in the five to seven per week category. Next were nondrinkers, at 411, and those who drank one or two days a week, at 428. The researchers then adjusted the results to account for how much the men consumed on the days they drank and for other health factors, such as whether they take aspirin, smoke or exercise.

The biggest reduction in risk was seen among men who drank from three to seven days per week; they were 30 percent to 35 percent less likely to develop heart disease than nondrinkers, who had the highest risk overall in the study. Whether the men had one, two or three per day made little difference. In addition, the authors wrote, "Neither the type of beverage nor the portion consumed with meals substantially altered this association."

Those who drank one or two days a week were still better off than nondrinkers, but had only a 16 percent lower risk of a heart attack.

The few heavy drinkers in the study -- those who had more than five glasses a day -- also saw a reduction in heart-attack risk, but such consumption has been linked to numerous health problems, such as liver disease and brain deterioration. "Only 3.5 percent of study participants reported consumption of 50 grams or more of alcohol," the researchers noted, "a fact that limited our ability to study the detrimental effects of heavy drinking."

Mukamal noted that no one should change their drinking habits without first consulting their doctor. This study only included men, and the results may be difficult to extrapolate to women. He explained, "Women have higher blood alcohol levels for a given degree of consumption, may have different drinking patterns, have a lower heart disease risk, or have a higher risk of other conditions worsened by alcohol [such as breast cancer]."