

Israeli Nutritionist: Why You Shouldn't Drink Alcohol at All

I am a Jewish male who just celebrated my 18th birthday, and until now, I have observed the law and have not drunk alcohol (although many of my friends do drink). I was wondering if some alcohol is good for my health or causes harm, and how much is too much. L.D., Liverpool, England

Dr. Olga Raz, head of the clinical nutrition department in the Health Sciences Faculty of Ariel University in Samaria, Israel, replies:

A study published last summer in the prestigious British medical journal *The Lancet* found that alcohol consumption is a very significant factor in harming health and shortening life expectancy.

Alcohol is an inseparable part of social life, meals, going out at night, longing, separation, joys and more. All this makes the alcohol industry a very powerful economic force. In the U.S. alone, alcohol sales reach \$220 billion a year—even though the dangers of alcohol abuse are well known and reported.

Some health organizations have claimed “moderate” alcohol consumption can be beneficial. But what is “moderate” drinking? According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Service and the Department of Agriculture, one or less drinks per day for women and up to two drinks daily for men is “moderate drinking.” The difference between recommendations for men and women is based on physiological characteristics: Among other things, perhaps the main reason is that the level of the enzyme that breaks down alcohol is lower in women's bodies than in men's.

Second, it is necessary to define what an alcohol dose is: beer about 330 milliliters, wine about 150 ml and whiskey and other “heavy” drinks about 45 ml.

Heavy drinking by women is four drinks or more in a day or more than eight per week; for men, it is five drinks or more in a day or more than 15 per week.

Aside from the fact that drinking alcohol seriously raises the risk of road accidents and violence, there are harmful effects on health:

- Increased triglycerides (harmful fats) in the blood, leading to a rise in the risk of cardiovascular disease
- fatty liver (increased risk of liver cirrhosis and liver failure)
- increased risk of dementia, heart disease and high blood pressure
- increased risk of cancers, such as gastrointestinal, breast and liver cancer
- a higher risk of depression and suicide
- in women who use alcohol during pregnancy, an increased risk of having a baby with brain injury, irreversible damage from fetal alcohol syndrome and more

Are there any positive effects of alcohol consumption? This is not certain at all. The abovementioned *Lancet* study claims that globally, alcohol consumption is one of the most significant factors that negatively affect health and shorten life expectancy.

The study showed that alcohol drinking causes death from any cause, especially cancer mortality, in direct proportion to the amount of alcohol. The study concluded that the level of alcohol consumption that minimizes the health risk is not drinking alcohol at all.

According to the results of the study, life expectancy at the age of 40 for those who consumed seven to 14 servings of

alcohol per week decreased by six months; for those who consumed between 14 to 25 servings per week one to two years; and those who consumed more than 25 servings per week four to five years.

So should you avoid alcohol altogether? If you have not drunk alcohol until now, you should not start drinking. If you've already started, drink as little as you can. You should not copy your friends' dangerous behaviors just to be "part of the crowd."

The policies of those health organizations that recommend moderate drinking for health must be thrown out. It is true that quite a number of studies have shown that moderate drinking can reduce the risk of stroke, heart attack and more. The problem is that these studies do not prove a cause-and-effect relationship, and even if there are advantages in general it is *impossible* to know who will benefit them specifically and who will be adversely affected. In other words, it is impossible to predict how specific alcohol consumption will affect a particular person. {eo}

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