Alcohol, Wine, and Cardiovascular Disease

Drinking too much alcohol can raise the levels of some fats in the blood (high blood triglycerides) (tri-GLIS'er-ídz). It can also lead to high blood pressure, heart failure and a high calorie intake. Consuming too many calories can lead to obesity and a higher risk of developing diabetes. Excessive drinking and binge drinking can lead to stroke. Other serious problems might include fetal alcohol syndrome, cardiomyopathy (kar"de-o-mi-OP'ah-the), cardiac arrhythmia (ah-RITH'me-ah) and sudden cardiac death.

AHA Recommendation

If you drink alcohol, do so in moderation. This means an average of one to two drinks per day for men and one drink per day for women.(A **drink** is one 12 oz. beer, 4 oz. of wine, 1.5 oz. of 80-proof spirits, or 1 oz. of 100-proof spirits.) **People who drink moderately have heart disease less often than nondrinkers. However, when people do drink more alcohol, public health dangers increase. These include alcoholism, high blood pressure, obesity, stroke, breast cancer, suicide and accidents. Given these and other risks, the American Heart Association cautions people NOT to start drinking ... if they do not already drink alcohol. Consult your doctor on the benefits and risks of consuming alcohol in moderation.**

What about red wine and heart disease?

Over the past several decades, many studies have been published in science journals about the potential benefits of drinking alcohol in reducing mortality due to heart disease. Some researchers have suggested that the benefit may be due to wine, especially red wine. Other researchers are examining the potential benefits of components in red wine such as flavonoids (FLAV'oh-noidz) and other antioxidants (an"tih-OK'sih-dants) in reducing heart disease risk. Some of these components may be found in other foods such as grapes or red grape juice. Another area of controversy is that the linkage reported in many of these studies may be due to

other lifestyle factors rather than alcohol. Such factors may include increased physical activity and a diet high in fruits and vegetables.

What are the benefits of drinking wine or other alcoholic beverages?

Research is being conducted to find out if the benefits of wine or alcohol consumption may be due to one or more factors, including an increased intake of antioxidants, an increase in HDL ("good") cholesterol or anti-clotting properties. Clinical trials of some antioxidants such as vitamin E have not shown any cardio-protective effect. Also, antioxidants can be obtained from many fruits and vegetables, including red grape juice.

The best-known effect of alcohol is an increase in HDL cholesterol. However, regular physical activity and weight loss are other effective ways to raise HDL cholesterol. Alcohol or some substances such as resveratrol (res-VAIR'ah-trol) that are in alcoholic beverages may prevent platelets in the blood from sticking together. That may reduce clot formation and reduce the risk of heart attack or stroke. Aspirin may help reduce blood clotting in a similar way. While studies on the potential mechanisms of alcohol or wine on cardiovascular risk merit further research, right now the American Heart Association does not recommend drinking wine or any other form of alcohol to achieve these potential benefits.

What about alcohol and pregnancy?

Pregnant women shouldn't drink alcohol in any form. It can harm the baby seriously, including causing birth defects.