FEB 1 2023 / DRY FEBRUARY?

[HALF SECOND OF SILENCE]

[BILLBOARD]

SCORING <Lazy Limp Dancing>

SEAN RAMESWARAM (host): It’s *Today, Explained*. So let me tell you about today.   
  
It’s February first, which means Dry January is over. If you don’t know about Dry January the deal is you start the year by abstaining from alcohol. People drink a lot during the holidays, so why not try and drink nothing at all in January.

But this Dry January felt a little more lit than those that preceded it. Just anecdotally, I heard about people taking part way more than usual. And on top of that, a lot of people were talking about the latest study on how much alcohol you should be drinking. Because based on the *latest* study, if you *really* wanna play it safe, you shouldn’t drink ANY!

That study came out of Canada, where previous guidance said you could drink about two drinks a day and be safe. The new guidance says if you *have* to drink, try and keep it at two drinks a *week*! These recommendations come as young people across western nations are already drinking less.

So, on the show today, we’re gonna humor Dry *February*! We’re gonna hear the case for not drinking at all.

[THEME]

SEAN: Sean Rameswaram here with Dr. Tim Naimi, director of the Canadian Institute for Substance Use Research. It’s one of the groups behind the latest study on how alcohol affects our health, and we wanted to go straight to the source.

DR. TIMOTHY NAIMI (director of the Canadian Institute for Substance Use Research): Alcohol is related to a number of different causes of death. You know, it's a small molecule. It can affect DNA. So alcohol, especially drinking over small amounts, is related to all the major forms of heart disease, like heart attacks, heart failure, irregular heartbeats and high blood pressure. It's also related to – causally related to – at least seven types of cancer, including colon cancer and breast cancer, and also a variety of stomach and intestinal problems and liver problems. And we can also talk about the risk of injuries or accidents, which start to increase – that's more based on your, you know, how much you drink on any one occasion as opposed to your average consumption.

SEAN: And if you’re like cancer? *Really*? I gave up smoking on account of *cancer* –

DR. NAIMI: Just to give your listeners more of a sense of it, there are studies that have compared, for example, alcohol to cigarettes as a cancer cause. And it's estimated that one drink of alcohol is approximately the same cancer, causing potential as one to two cigarettes depending on if you're a man or a woman. Another way to think about it is that for breast cancer, which is a pretty common cancer among women, for each additional drink that a woman consumes per day on average, that that results in about a somewhere between an eight and a 10% increase of the risk of cancer over her baseline risk of cancer. Right. So not – not everyone's you know. But if we say that you know, depending on what number you look at like one in 12 women will develop or one in 12, one in 11, one in ten, depending on what age you use, will develop breast cancer. An additional drink per day is about a 10% increase in risk. So it's an absolute 1% increase in the risk of developing breast cancer. These are complicated messages to get across, but that just to give you kind of a sense.

SEAN: All of this might feel like a buzzkill compared to all those previous studies that said, ‘go ahead and have a glass or two of wine a day.’ But Dr. Naimi says that isn’t *actually* what those studies said.

DR. NAIMI: Actually the – the results of this study are actually very similar, which is even the previous studies that were thinking, ‘Oh, maybe a little bit of wine is maybe good for us.’ What was very clear is that above even those studies, above even a half a drink a day, on average, the risk started to climb up. But I think even there, the risks were underestimated. But if you view it in that light, what we're seeing in our study, which is based on, thousands of studies over the past 20 years, it's kind of a consistent message that above very low levels of alcohol, the risk of an alcohol-caused death starts to increase. Before it was like up to six or seven drinks a week. And now we're saying it's probably more like that risk starts to climb up starting at three drinks a week and higher.

SEAN: Hm. But what my mom would say back to you <laughs> –

DR. NAIMI: Yeah!

SEAN: – is that the queen had a gin every day, if not multiples. And she lived to be, like, 98 or whatever.

DR. NAIMI: Yeah. No, no. Well, I think that's great. Like, so all of these risks, Sean, are massive averages, right? We are developing sort of national guidelines. For example, is the queen living longer because she has a glass of gin every night or is the queen living longer because, you know, she has the best doctors and she, you know, enjoys walks and has a healthy lifestyle and has no stress? It's not saying, you know, I don't know. I've never been a queen, myself, right, but I’m just –   
  
SEAN: <laughs>   
  
DR. NAIMI: So if the queen lives to be 99, do we think it's because she drinks a glass of gin or do you think it's because she's the queen? I bet it's because she's the queen myself.

SEAN: <laughs>

DR. NAIMI: But even if she worked, the queen or even if the queen wasn't in a very socially advantaged position – and we know that actually social advantage is probably the most important determinant of life expectancy and quality of life. Even if that wasn't the case, I think we all know, you know, the aunt or the uncle who drank like a fish and smoked like a chimney and lived to be 100.   
  
SEAN: Uh-huh.   
  
DR. NAIMI: And we also know, you know, unfortunately, other people who, like, were super healthy did everything right and passed away of some god-awful disease, you know, in their forties. Right? So I think again these are giant averaging effect and you know, long live the queen and her gin. But again, I think – you know, I’m making light of the situation, but I think that's that's sort of the issue. We can all think of exceptions or again, drinking is sort of an upper it's considered a luxury item because if you look throughout society, actually people in middle and higher incomes are more likely to drink alcohol than people in low incomes. It is somewhat of a socioeconomic marker. So again, I think we have to kind of keep that in mind when we're thinking about who lives longer and why.

SEAN: Does this study that you and your outfit –

DR. NAIMI: My outfit! <laughs> I like it.

SEAN: <giggles> Does it purport to be the final word? Because I think part of the frustration here is people can't keep track of whether it's good or bad or what's okay. One drink, two drink, three drink, and now maybe zero drinks – again, not don't ever drink – but the least amount of risk is associated with zero drinks. You know, I feel like people just roll their eyes. But here we have one that feels to be, I don't know, different at least?  
  
DR. NAIMI: Yeah. Well, let me ask you, because here at my “outfit”, at the Canadian Institute for Substance Use Research, again, we were just one of 16 “outfits” across Canada that worked on this. As a scientist, I would say to you absolutely science is never definitive. Anyone who tells you that any study is definitive is probably not a great scientist, in my opinion.  
  
SEAN: Mm.   
  
DR. NAIMI: But what I would say to this is that this represents the best current science we're using, I think, the best methods that is the way that the World Health Organization calculates alcohol-attributable deaths. And again, the main message that's coming out of these guidelines is actually consistent with all the other research, which if you boil it down at the end of the day: if you drink alcohol and you want to help your health, drinking less is better than drinking more. How low you need to go, there's some play in that. But I can absolutely tell you that what is the most consistent finding in the literature that's been there for decades is that, you know, when it comes to longevity, less alcohol is the way to go.

SEAN: We did a show awhile back on the social benefits of drinking. It was called “The Case for Drinking.”

*CASSETTE SFX*

*<CLIP> THE ATLANTIC SENIOR EDITOR KATE JULIAN: Human civilization requires people to cooperate. And there's a line of thinking that, you know, alcohol may have helped us to do that. It sort of socially disinhibits us just enough to sort of cooperate. In a way, it may be similar to what religion did for early humans. I mean, essentially just as early religions gave people something to rally around, alcohol may have played a pretty similar function.*

*CASSETTE SFX*

SEAN: Did your study take into account any of those factors, or is that sort of a different question for you guys?

DR. NAIMI: First of all, and we acknowledge this in the report, there are many reasons why people choose to drink or not to drink. Our report is primarily focused on, on health. You know, for some people, drinking alcohol has some of those kind of social benefits. Again, typically at really relatively low levels. We also have to remember that alcohol is the leading preventable cause of intellectual disability in children.

*<CLIP> DEMOCRACY NOW: Alcohol causes blackout. People often don’t remember what they did in a state of intoxication. The dangers of that are enormous. We see domestic violence, abuse, rape, neglect – occur in the context of alcohol.*

DR. NAIMI: So, like, if we want to get into the social aspects, good and bad of alcohol, we should consider the full spectrum of them. And again, I think in terms of the social benefits, those are happening more at the lower, you know, aspects of consumption. You didn't try to quantify those benefits. But again, I think when you increase consumption, the number of harmful social consequences increases and the beneficial ones start to decrease. So when people are deciding, you know, how much they want to drink, they're going to be thinking about a bunch of different stuff. And we just want to have good, credible information on the health aspects and let people kind of put that into the mix.

SEAN: Can I ask you about loneliness before we go?

DR. NAIMI: Sure.

SEAN: ‘Cuz there's like a loneliness pandemic. You've surely heard of it. Loneliness is deadly in its own way, it’s –   
  
DR. NAIMI: Yeah.   
  
SEANI: It seems to be spiking across the Western world. And I wonder if there's like a competing phenomena here that, you know, people are maybe drinking less and thus they're more lonely because they're socializing less and they're not leaving the house. Do you, do you think there's any relation between alcohol consumption and loneliness? I know you just listed a host of things that, that are negative associations with alcohol. Is loneliness a byproduct of people drinking less?

DR. NAIMI: Well, that's an interesting way of thinking about it. I guess I'll just sort of go off the top of my head.

SCORING <UNEASY STREET>

DR. NAIMI: I think it depends on what kind of activities you do. So for people whose social networks and a lot of that – their activities are very alcohol centric, well then if they stop drinking, they may lose some of those friends or some of those activities may be more difficult. But I think one of the ideas behind Dry January is to see how we feel not doing that and actually to, like, maybe reach out to other people or to try other activities that are less dependent on alcohol because lo and behold, they might be pretty good and they might help with loneliness. So actually, I think your question, which is a really good question, points to the fact that for many people, alcohol equates to being social or not being lonely. And I think that I understand that that's the reality for some people. But I also think that it's good for people to see all the other things that can open up to them when they drink less or not at all – other, you know, sort of other things that they can do and sort of kind of achieve a balance.

SCORING BUMP

SEAN: That was Dr. Tim Naimi. His outfit is called the Canadian Institute for Substance Use Research. They’re based in Victoria, British Columbia. We’re gonna take a break and then we’ll hear from a guy who hasn’t been drinking since before it was cool. It’s *Today, Explained*.

[BREAK]

*<CLIP> ABC NEWS: According to The Chronicle, there has been a big growth in non-alcoholic beers, wines, and spirits during the pandemic. The demand has become so high that sober bars and shops are opening up. Restaurants have also added non-alcoholic drinks to their menu, saying: it’s the same as adding gluten-free options to their menu to accommodate everyone’s taste.*

SEAN: *Today, Explained* is back. Abstaining from alcohol seems to be having a moment, which is great news for Ross Haenfler.

ROSS HAENFLER (sociology professor, Grinnell College): Yeah, that's right. Like a lot of young kids, I grew up just thinking that drinking was one of the things you did on the way to adulthood. And especially as a young man, I felt a lot of pressure to drink and drink heavily at a fairly young age, and I never liked the taste. I didn't appreciate the peer pressure that came along with it, the sense of having to prove my masculinity by drinking a lot. And fortunately I was lucky enough – this is in the late 1980s – to encounter the punk rock scene, and I met some people that were straight edge.

*<CLIP> ABC NEWS, 1980s: So-called straight-edgers don't even drink, they don't smoke and they don't do drugs.*

ROSS: They had made a commitment not to use alcohol, drugs and tobacco and made it cool not to use.

*<CLIP> ABC NEWS, 1980s: all straight-edge is is a way to live your life better, as a way to live your life positive. And it's a brotherhood.*

ROSS: And I fell in love not just with the hardcore music, but with that lifestyle as well.

SCORING <STRAIGHT EDGE - MINOR THREAT>

ROSS: Straight edge emerged in the punk rock and hardcore scenes of Washington, DC in the early 1980s. And it was really just a bunch of young people in that scene who love the “question everything” mentality of punk, the art, the aggressive music, but weren't so interested in kind of the heavy drugs and alcohol use that were – that were really going on in the scene at that time. So there were a couple of bands, the Teen Idols, and then more famously Minor Threat, who promoted kind of an alternative. And Minor Threat wrote this song called “Straight Edge.” And the idea being that one shouldn't be picked on or judged for the fact that they don't want to use, that there are other paths. And it was really a statement for individuals to live life in the way that they wanted to live life. But it must have struck a chord because even pre-Internet Age, it caught on all across the U.S. and soon beyond. And now in 2023, is a worldwide movement with young people in many, many countries adopting the universal symbol, the X on the hand or on in a tattoo or on a shirt to proclaim their allegiance to that identity.

SCORING OUT

SEAN: Grown up Ross still doesn’t drink. And he’s now a professor and the *chair* of sociology at Grinnell College in Grinnell, Iowa. I asked him why there’s so much less of a stigma associated with abstaining from alcohol in 2023.

DR. HAENFLER: Yeah, I think in a lot of ways attitudes have just shifted and there's not one perfect explanation for that. And I think it's important to – to note that there's declines in drinking, especially amongst young people in many different countries, you know, across Western Europe, across North America, Australia, New Zealand. This is really something bigger than any one, you know, one country or one, one state or one city speaking. You know, for the US case in particular, there was a recent study in the Journal of the American Medical Association, the pediatrics version of that journal, that looked at young people from 2002 to 2018. The number of college students that choose not to drink, that abstain completely rose from 20% in the early 2000s to just about 28%, you know, in 2018. And the same was true for non college folks who are almost at 30% choosing not to drink. So there is some good data out there that's just demonstrating that, that it's not as big of a priority for a lot of people.

*<CLIP> SCOTT SIMON, 2017: Teen drug use in the US is in decline. A government study found that the overall use of alcohol, marijuana prescription meds and illicit substances dropped among American Teens last year. But why?*

SEAN: What are these kids doing instead? Are they… are they vaping? Are they spending all their time on TikTok? What is it? I hear they're not having sex, either!

DR. HAENFLER: <laughs> Well, you know, I have to say that as much as previous generations want to sort of say, ‘Kids these days have it so easy.’ That's just not that – the reality for young people today, who I think in many ways experience a very uncertain future. I mean, all of the, the social problems that many of us think about on a daily basis, but they're just a little more risk averse. They don't want to do anything that might jeopardize their future prospects. They're not even sure if they work hard and, you know, go to university if they'll be able to pay off their student loans or get a good job or just have a reasonable standard of living. So there's just a lot more of kind of being careful, you know, planning for the future. And then on top of that, I think that this decline in drinking in some ways overlaps with the rise of social media.

*<CLIP> GMA: According to Pew Research 96 percent of teens go online every single day, and 46 percent are almost constantly online. Fifty-four percent say it would be really hard to give up social media.*

DR. HAENFLER: Some young people feel like they're under constant surveillance, so anything that they do while intoxicated could be recorded by anyone and they could be, you know, the next meme circulating at their high school or their, you know, their workplace or their university. And there's also just better ways to connect. So there are all kinds of sober groups on Facebook, on Twitter, and there are people making TikToks about their sobriety.

*<CLIP> TIKTOK: After five years of trying and failing, here's how I finally got sober…*

DR. HAENFLER: Whereas in the past, one might have felt really isolated in their sobriety, Now there are ways to reach out and connect with like minded others.

*<CLIP> TIKTOK: Hey my name is Degan. I am fighting for sobriety…*

SEAN: Are we seeing residual benefits in society? Are there fewer alcohol related deaths? Are there fewer instances of, you know, drunk driving? Do we, do we yet see the sort of payoffs of fewer young people drinking – beyond their health, presumably?

DR. HAENFLER: Right, yeah, I'm not so sure. We're seeing a lot of those payoffs quite yet. But I think it's a really powerful thing to note that the heavy drinking of the 1990s and into the early 2000s wasn't just a natural state of affairs. It wasn't just something that was going to happen regardless. Like there were industries that were promoting this and profiting from connecting youth culture, especially to alcohol use.

*<CLIP> BUD:   
GUY: Hello?   
GUY2: Hey yo.   
GUY: What’s up?  
GUY2: Nothing B, just watching then game, having a Bud, sup which you?   
GUY3: WAZZZZZUP????  
GUY: WAAAZZZZUUUP?”*

DR. HAENFLER: And so, you know, we find ourselves in, you know, kind of a culture where alcohol is almost inseparable from most social gatherings, no matter what your age.

*<CLIP> ANHEUSER BUSCH, 2021:   
NARRATOR: So, when you say ‘Let’s grab a beer,’ it’s never just about the beer.   
LADY: Come on. I’m buying you a beer.   
GUY: Okay!*

DR. HAENFLER: And so I think the real impact here to, to, to keep our eyes on is will this cultural shift persist? You know, it's kind of remarkable to have people suggesting, you know, it's okay not to drink. It shouldn't be remarkable. But in the face of all of the pressures and all of the moneyed interests that, you know, are profiting in many ways from people suffering, it's it's pretty fascinating to watch unfold.

SCORING <DROP SCONE DREAM>

SEAN: To bring this back to your straight edge experience in the late eighties and early nineties. How does it feel to be someone who doesn't drink in 2023 for you?

DR. HAENFLER: Yeah, I feel like I'm finally in better company, so I haven't had alcohol for well over 30 years at this point. That means I went through my later high school years, all of my college and graduate school years and beyond, being sober and often being the only person who was sober in my social circles. And so now to, you know, see people that have never heard of punk or straight edge, sometimes i–identifying as straight edge, even if they're not in the hardcore scene…   
  
SEAN: Hm.   
  
DR. HAENFLER: … it's, it's kind of wild, actually. It's a little surprising. But for me, I just always wanted people to have a better sense of themselves and their choices. And we think of peer pressure as something that middle schoolers have to deal with. Not adults were supposed to grow out of that. But the fact is, is our our social surroundings create our opportunities and constraints, and going against that grain can feel tough. So having gone against that grain for several decades, it's, uh, it feels good to see that, that, that's beyond my little punk rock scene and is now more widely accepted.

SCORING BUMP

SEAN: Ross Haenfler. Sociologist. Grinnell College. Our show today was made by Amanda Lewellyn and Miles Bryan with help from Matthew Collette, Laura Bullard, and Efim Shapiro.

Thanks to Bill Shufelt at Athletic Brewing. It’s *Today, Explained*.

[10 SECONDS OF SILENCE]