Two hours a week of exercise could offset the dangers of alcohol

* [Sarah Knapton](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/authors/sarah-knapton/)

8 SEPTEMBER 2016 • 12:23AM

Spending two and a half hour a week walking, gardening or playing golf may offset the deadly[impact of drinking too much alcohol,](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/wellbeing/health-advice/what-alcohol-does-to-your-body-after-the-age-of-40/) new research suggests.

Although health guidelines state that both men and women should stop drinking at 14 units a week – the equivalent of seven medium glasses of wine or pints of beer – the new study suggests that exercising mitigates the lethal impact of alcohol even at higher than recommended levels.

Drinking too much has been linked to a heightened risk of death from all causes, including cancer, heart disease and stroke.

The new research by University College London and the University of Sydney found that drinking - even within guidelines - raises the risk of early death by at least 16 per cent and cancer by 47 per cent.

But 150 minutes a week of moderate activity completely cancelled out the impact of death from all causes while lowering the cancer risk by 36 per cent. It also cut the chance of dying from hazardous drinking by more than half.

The scientists believe that drinking alcohol and exercising share a similar metabolic pathway in the body but operate in opposing directions. While alcohol forces the liver to abandon its work getting rid of fatty acids, exercise does the reverse, using up fat as fuel. So while drinking is damaging to health, exercise is protective.

“Our results provide an additional argument for the role of[physical activity as a means to promote the health of the population even in the presence of other less healthy behaviours,](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/health/news/6652208/Exercise-does-not-compensate-for-drinking-too-much.html)” said Dr Annie Britton, Department of Epidemiology and Public Health, University College London, London, UK.

“The public health relevance of our results is further emphasised by the recently updated alcohol consumption guidelines review by the UK Chief Medical Officer that found that cancer mortality risk starts from a relatively low level of alcohol consumption.”

The study looked at six health surveys involving 36,370 people in England and Scotland carried out between 1994 and 1998 which included questions about drinking and activity levels among those aged over 40. During the study period nearly 6,000 people died.

The researchers found that the chance of developing cancer and dying early rose steadily as people consumed more alcohol.

But when physical activity was factored in, the risk of death was cancelled out or even lowered as people undertook more exercise even up to hazardous levels, the equivalent of 35 units for a woman and 49 for a man.

While hazardous drinking usually raises the risk of early death by 20 per cent and cancer death by 52 per cent, moderate exercise lowered the risks to 9 per cent and 18 per cent respectively. Doubling the level of exercise per week to 5 hours completely cancelled out the impact of hazardous drinking.

Although the researchers say the study is only observational, they conclude that the findings indicate that [physical activity has the potential to curb some of the harmful effects of drinking,](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/health/news/11200656/What-calories-are-in-alcohol-and-how-to-burn-it-off.html) even at minimum weekly recommended levels.

British experts said that the study appeared to show ‘clear conclusions’ about the relationship between exercise and alcohol death but said people should not think they can drink what they want and then off-set it with exercise.

Prof Matt Field, Professor of Psychology, University of Liverpool, part of the UK Centre for Tobacco and Alcohol Studies, said: “This is a rigorous piece of research with some clear conclusions: the relationship between drinking alcohol to excess and increased risk of death is significantly weaker in people who are physically active.

“Therefore, it appears that physical activity may partially offset some of the harmful effects of drinking, particularly alcohol-attributable cancers.

“However people who are already ill may be less active than those who are healthy and the researchers were unable to look at the role of different types of drinking. We do not know how these findings might generalise to younger adults, particularly if they primarily binge drink rather than spread their alcohol units over the week.”

Prof Kevin McConway, Emeritus Professor of Statistics, The Open University, added:“Does this mean that I don’t have to worry about the effect of drinking on my health, as long as I get enough exercise? Well, no it doesn’t.

“Maybe the people who exercised a lot tended to have different diets, or different drinking patterns, and maybe that is what changed the risk pattern and not the exercise at all.”

The experts said it was also difficult to know if people had been accurate in their estimation of both alcohol intake and exercise.

The research was publishing in the British Journal of Sports Science.