Moderate drinking can lower risk of heart attack, says study

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Drinking in moderation helps protect heart, with study finding it lowers risk of many conditions compared with not drinking

Moderate drinking can lower the risk of several heart conditions, according to a study that will further fuel the debate about the health implications of alcohol consumption.

The study of 1.93 million people in the UK aged over 30 found that drinking in moderation – defined as consuming no more than 14 units of alcohol a week for women and 21 units for men – had a protective effect on the heart compared with not drinking.

Previous studies have suggested that alcohol has a positive effect on the levels of good [cholesterol](https://www.theguardian.com/society/2017/mar/18/drug-which-cuts-bad-cholesterol-can-help-prevent-heart-attacks-and-strokes) in the blood and proteins associated with blood clotting.

The research, published in the British Medical Journal, found that moderate drinkers were less likely than non-drinkers to turn up at their doctor with angina, heart attack, heart failure, ischaemic stroke, circulation problems caused by a build-up of fat in the arteries and aortic aneurysm than non-drinkers.

But the research found that heavy drinking – more than 14 units for women and 21 units for men – increased the risk of heart failure, cardiac arrest, ischaemic stroke and circulation problems caused by fatty arteries.

The authors of the study, from the University of Cambridge and University College London, welcomed the findings but cautioned: “While we found that moderate drinkers were less likely to initially present with several cardiovascular diseases than non-drinkers, it could be argued that it would be unwise to encourage individuals to take up drinking as a means of lowering their risk.

“This is because there are arguably safer and more effective ways of reducing cardiovascular risk, such as [increasing physical activity](https://www.theguardian.com/society/2016/sep/07/exercise-override-alcohol-risk-diseases-study-suggests) and smoking cessation, which do not incur increased risks of alcohol-related harm such as alcohol dependence, liver disease and cancer.”

Moderate alcohol consumption has long been associated with a lower risk of heart disease compared with abstinence or heavy drinking but the authors described their study as the most comprehensive to date on the relationship.

Non-drinkers were separated from former and occasional drinkers. With previous studies, concerns have been raised that people who have stopped drinking due to illness could have skewed results among non-drinkers.

An independent review of evidence, which formed the basis for last year’s [change in the official advice on alcohol consumption](https://www.theguardian.com/news/datablog/2016/jan/08/how-do-the-uks-new-alcohol-guidelines-compare-with-the-rest-of-the-worlds), lowering the recommended limit for men from 21 units to 14, making it the same as the guideline for women, found that the benefits of drinking for heart health only apply for women aged 55 and over and the greatest benefit is seen when they limit their intake to about five units a week, equivalent to about two standard glasses of wine.

The new study found that heavy drinking resulted in an increased risk of a range of heart diseases compared with moderate drinking, but carried a lower risk of heart attack and angina.

The authors cautioned that this did not mean they were less likely to experience a heart attack in future, just that they were less likely to present these conditions at first diagnosis, compared with moderate drinkers. Also, as the study is observational, no firm conclusions can be drawn about cause and effect.

One unit of alcohol is about equal to half a pint of ordinary strength beer, lager or cider (3.6% alcohol by volume) or a small pub measure (25ml) of spirits. There are one and a half units of alcohol in a small glass (125ml) of ordinary strength wine (12% alcohol by volume).

Dr James Nicholls, the director of research and policy development at [Alcohol](https://www.theguardian.com/society/alcohol)Research UK, said that given the increased risk of other health conditions from drinking, moderate alcohol consumption within existing guidelines was unlikely to curtail or lengthen life expectancy overall.

“While the findings provide convincing evidence for protective effects, the authors sensibly point out that this doesn’t mean it would be wise to take up drinking in order to lengthen one’s life – not least because any protective effects tend to be cancelled out by even occasional bouts of heavier drinking,” he said.

“There are better ways to strengthen the heart such as exercise and good diet. All things being equal – and given the increased risk of suffering other health conditions linked to any amount of alcohol consumption – if you drink within the existing guidelines it is unlikely that alcohol will either lengthen or shorten your life.”

• This article was amended on 24 March 2017. Because of an editing error, an earlier version suggested that the new study had used a definition of moderate drinking based on the current UK guideline of no more 14 units of alcohol a week for both men and women.