Moderate drinkers have lower risk of heart attack

**Kat Lay, Health Correspondent**

March 23 2017, 12:01am, The Times

Drinking alcohol in moderation can lower the risk of a heart attack, angina or heart failure, according to a study of almost two million people.

Sticking to the recommended limits, broadly a glass of wine or a pint of beer a day, appeared to protect against developing certain heart conditions, researchers found.

However, it was not linked with a lower risk of all heart conditions and experts said that exercising and stopping smoking would be a better option for those hoping to improve their health.

Previous studies have suggested that moderate drinkers have a lower risk of cardiovascular disease than non-drinkers or heavy drinkers, but were too small to determine whether the impact was the same for all types of alcohol. They were criticised because they often failed to separate non-drinkers from former drinkers, who may have stopped because of poor health.

Researchers from Cambridge University and University College London said that their findings suggested a more nuanced approach to the role of alcohol in preventing heart problems was needed.

In the UK, moderate drinkers are considered to be those who stay within the recommended limits of no more than 14 units of alcohol a week. One unit is roughly equal to a half pint of ordinary strength beer, and there are about one and a half units in a small, 125ml, glass of wine.

The study, published in *the BMJ*, is based on the electronic health records of 1.93 million healthy UK adults. It separated former drinkers from tee- totallers.

Scientists found that moderate drinkers were less likely to arrive at their doctor suffering from angina, heart attack, heart failure, ischaemic stroke (the most common type), circulation problems caused by a build-up of fat in the arteries and aortic aneurysm than non-drinkers were.

In contrast, drinking more than the recommended limit was linked to a higher risk of presenting with a range of such diseases, including heart failure, cardiac arrest and ischaemic stroke. Although heavy drinking carried a lower risk of heart attack and angina, the researchers said that this did not mean heavy drinkers would not have a heart attack in the future, just that they were less likely to see a doctor for it as their first diagnosis.

The researchers said that they would not encourage people to take up drinking “as a means of lowering their risk . . . because there are arguably safer and more effective ways of reducing cardiovascular risk, such as increasing physical activity and smoking cessation, which do not incur increased risks of alcohol-related harm such as alcohol dependence, liver disease, and cancer”.

They said that their findings supported the decision not to incorporate the apparently protective effects of drinking in the recent UK chief medical officers’ alcohol guidelines review.

Previous studies have suggested that alcohol has a positive effect on the levels of “good” cholesterol in the blood and of proteins associated with blood clotting.

Tracy Parker, from the British Heart Foundation, said: “It’s important to remember that the risks of drinking alcohol far outweigh any possible benefits. And these findings are certainly no reason to start drinking alcohol if you don’t already.” Rosanna O’Connor, director of alcohol, drugs and tobacco at Public Health England, said: “As the researchers importantly stress, those who don’t drink should not consider taking up drinking to improve their heart health, but are better off stopping smoking, getting regular physical activity and eating a healthy diet.”

Dave Roberts, director general of the Alcohol Information Partnership, which is funded by drinks firms including Diageo, Campari and Bacardi, said: “This new study confirms yet again what previous studies have consistently found. Moderate alcohol consumption can have a beneficial impact on health.”