**Why healthy eating saves middle-class drinkers from \***

**(\*I’ve double checked the title online and it ends abruptly…)**

CHRIS SMYTHTHE TIMESFEBRUARY 18, 2016 4:01PM

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If you are a slim member of the non-smoking middle classes who enjoys a bottle of wine over a healthy meal, there is good news: the affluent can get away with drinking too much because they are less likely to have other bad habits that amplify the dangers of alcohol, the first study of its kind concludes.

While the rich tend to drink more than the poor, scientists have long been puzzled as to why they do not seem to be made as ill by the same amount of alcohol. Now researchers believe that they have an answer: poorer drinkers are more likely get sick because they also tend to be overweight smokers who do not eat their greens, magnifying their risks.

Combining unhealthy habits increases the risk of illness by more than the sum of their parts, with drinking and smoking twice as dangerous as the individual risks would imply, the scientists warn.

Public health experts have questioned 6,000 people about their habits, finding that 83 per cent of poorer people who drink more than recommended levels have at least one other unhealthy habit, compared with 67 per cent of richer drinkers.

Nearly 9 per cent of the poorest risky drinkers also smoke, are overweight, get little exercise and eat little in the way of fruit and vegetables, compared with just 1 per cent of richer drinkers.

The report is published in the journal BMC Public Health.

Mark Bellis of Bangor University, who led the study, said: “These things do not just add to each other — they have a multiplicative effect. When you are overweight you do not just get the risk of being overweight and [the risk of drinking], you get those added and effectively doubled as well. The effects may be even greater when you add three or four types of [unhealthy] behaviour in.”

Exactly how this happens is still unclear but Professor Bellis said: “In general terms the body is trying to maintain itself in a constant level of balance. Alcohol is providing a challenge to the body in keeping that balance and if you have got multiple challenges it becomes increasingly difficult for the body to maintain a healthy balance.”

Poorer people were more likely to binge rather than drink steadily through the week, which also increases their health risk.

The study defined risky drinkers as men who had more than 21 units a week and women who had more than 14, although recent official guidance brought the recommended weekly limit for men down to the same as that for women.

Professor Bellis said that such guidance ought to warn people that the risks are greater if they also have generally unhealthy lifestyles.

“We need on an individual level for people to understand that being overweight and having an unhealthy lifestyle may carry additional risks when you’re drinking alcohol,” he said. “People should understand that if they are overweight, smoking and drinking then the risks are not just adding to each other, they are going to multiply each other.”

While slim non-smokers who enjoy sharing a bottle of wine every night over a healthy meal are likely to be heartened by the findings, Professor Bellis said: “This is no way suggests that you can avoid the risks of alcohol by changing the other things in your life. What you can do is bring down some of the overlap and multiplicative effects.”

James Nicholls, of Alcohol Research UK, said: “This highlights the importance of wider social, economic and behavioural factors in understanding alcohol-related harm. It suggests health risks from alcohol are much greater when combined with smoking, poor diet and low levels of physical activity.”

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