

## **Alcohol - to drink or not to drink?**

Our fast-paced lives today may be quite a balancing act - you may be juggling a high pressured stressful job, trying to keep your family happy, fitting in some time for your hobby or sport, keeping up with your jungle of a garden and managing all of those household chores! It may be enough to drive you to drink! After all a few glasses of red wine are good for your health..... Is this so?

It has long been known that the French who eat as much saturated fats as many other people with westernized eating habits, have a much lower incidence of heart disease. This 'French paradox' was attributed to their red wine intake – as red wine contains polyphenols (potent anti-oxidants) which protect against LDL ('bad') cholesterol oxidation and reduces the tendency of blood platelets from becoming 'sticky', so helps prevent blood clotting. However, more recent studies have found that the protective effect of alcohol is not only found with wine, but also with other alcoholic drinks.

Does this mean that you can drink as much alcohol as you like? Although moderate consumption of alcohol may have positive effects on some people, certain individuals should not drink alcohol at all. Alcohol can be addictive and alcohol abuse can lead to serious health consequences including:

- high blood pressure
- increased levels of triglycerides (a type of fat in the blood)
- heart muscle damage, heart rhythm disturbances, heart failure and sudden cardiac death
- stroke
- liver damage
- increased risk of breast cancer

Also, all alcoholic drinks contain empty calories and stimulate your appetite which may contribute to weight gain. So when downing your next drink consider the calorie content that may be contributing to your waistline:

- 1 regular beer (340 ml) is equivalent to 1 starch and 2 fat portions
- 1 small glass of dry wine (125 ml) or a tot of spirits (25ml) is equivalent to 2 fat portions

People who should not drink alcohol at all include:

- children and adolescents
- women planning a pregnancy as well as women who are pregnant or are breastfeeding
- those taking medications that may interact with alcohol
- individuals who have certain medical conditions including pancreatitis
- those who cannot restrict their alcohol intake

### **Make a responsible drinking choice**

Although moderate consumption of alcohol may have positive effects and may protect against heart disease, it cannot be recommended purely to reduce your cardiovascular disease risk. If you do not drink alcohol – do not start! You could obtain beneficial health effects by including a variety of other antioxidant rich foods such as fruit (apples, grapes, cranberries), vegetables (onions) and whole grains on a daily basis. However, if you choose to drink – do it sensibly by limiting intake to no more than 2 drinks per day for men and 1 drink per day for women. Drinking more than this may increase your risk of high blood pressure - so more is not recommended.

### **One drink is equivalent to**

- 1 can of beer (340 ml)
- 1 small glass of wine (125 ml)
- 1 small glass of sherry (60 ml)
- 1 tot of spirits (25ml of whisky, brandy, vodka, gin, etc.) or
- 1 small glass of liqueur (25ml)

To limit your caloric intake and to prevent becoming dehydrated, try to alternate each alcoholic drink with a glass of water. Also try choosing drinks like dry wine, spirits with water or diet soft drinks instead of high calorie drinks such as sweet wine, sherry or liqueurs. Light beers are also better alternatives to standard beers or ciders. Cocktails such as martinis and daiquiris are especially calorie dense, so try to limit yourself to only one. Also make sure that you don't drink alcohol on an empty stomach - rather eat a healthy snack or meal first. Most importantly: enjoy a heart healthy life; don't drink and drive – arrive alive!

For more information on general heart health contact the Heart Mark Diet Line on 0860 223 222, email [heart@heartfoundation.co.za](mailto:heart@heartfoundation.co.za) or visit [www.heartfoundation.co.za](http://www.heartfoundation.co.za).

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