

Study reveals moderate drinking protective against heart disease

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A landmark study by Monash University researchers has found that moderate drinking of alcohol is associated with a reduced risk of cardiovascular disease and a lowering of mortality from all

causes—when compared to zero alcohol consumption. The study in more than 18,000 people in the US and Australia over the age of 70 is the first to look at the heart health implications of alcohol intake.

Excess [alcohol consumption](#) is a leading contributor to the global burden of disease and a major risk factor for mortality. Yet, prior studies suggested that moderate alcohol consumption may be associated with a lower risk of cardiovascular disease (CVD) events.

This Monash University study, published in the *European Journal of Preventive Cardiology* is the first to investigate the risk of CVD events and mortality, from all causes, associated with alcohol consumption in initially healthy, older individuals.

Populations around the world are aging. The Monash University- led Aspirin in Reducing Events in the Elderly (ASPREE) clinical trial was a large-scale, long-term multi-center, bi-national study of aspirin and health in older adults, with the purpose to discover ways to maintain health, quality of life and independence as we age.

This study, led by Dr. Johannes Neumann, from the Monash University School of Public Health and Preventive Medicine, analyzed data from almost 18,000 ASPREE participants—Australians and Americans mostly aged 70 years and older.

Participants in the study did not have prior CVD events, diagnosed dementia or independence-limiting physical disability. CVD events included coronary heart disease death, non-fatal myocardial infarction, fatal and non-fatal stroke, non-coronary cardiac or vascular death, and hospitalization for heart failure. Information on alcohol consumption (days of drinking per week and average standard drinks per day) was assessed by self-reported questionnaire at baseline. The study excluded former alcohol consumers who may have stopped alcohol consumption

for various health reasons, possibly introducing bias from reverse causality.

Based on this information, the alcohol intake was calculated as grams per week—for US participants a standard drink was equivalent to 14 g and 10 g for Australian participants.

In the study, alcohol consumption was categorized as 0 (never drinks) and those who drink 1–50; 51–100; 101–150, and >150g/week. For Australians that is up to 5; 5-10; 10-14 and over 15 standard drinks per week. For Americans—that is up to 3.5; 3.5-7; 7-10 and over 10 standard drinks per week. Of the almost 18,000 eligible participants with median age 74 years:

- 57% were female
- 43.3% were current or former smokers and
- mean BMI was 28.1 kg/m²

The participants reported that

- 18.6% ingested no alcohol every week
- 37.3% reported 1–50 g/week
- 19.7% reported 51–100 g/week
- 15.6% reported 101–150 g/week
- 8.9% reported >150 g/week

The participants were followed for an average of 4.7 years and the study found that there was a reduced risk of CVD events for individuals consuming alcohol of 51–100, 101–150, and >150 g/week, compared to never consuming alcohol, regardless of gender.

Consumption of 51–100 g/week was also associated with a reduced risk of all-cause mortality.

Lead author, Dr. Neumann, says the findings need to be interpreted with caution, as study participants were all initially healthy without prior CVD or other severe diseases, and may have been more physically and socially active than the wider aging population.

Furthermore, prior evidence showed that excess [alcohol consumption](#) increases the [risk](#) of other chronic diseases, such as cancer, liver [disease](#) or pancreatitis.

In summary, modest alcohol intake in this group of healthy older adults was not harmful for CVD or overall mortality. According to Dr. Neumann, further research is warranted to evaluate causal biological effects of alcohol on health and possible behavioral advantages of social drinking and engagement.

More information: Johannes T Neumann et al, Alcohol consumption and risks of cardiovascular disease and all-cause mortality in healthy older adults, *European Journal of Preventive Cardiology* (2021). [DOI: 10.1093/eurjpc/zwab177](#)

Provided by Monash University

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