Cheers to preventing heart disease, not breast cancer

By ACSH Staff — November 2, 2011

Consuming alcohol in moderate amounts, it seems, is something of a double-edged sword. As for its benefits, numerous studies have indicated that drinking one to two servings of alcohol a day reduces a person’s risk for cardiovascular disease. However, a new study from Harvard Medical School shows [1] that even a few drinks a week can increase a woman’s risk of breast cancer.

In the study just published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, researchers followed over 100,000 women for more than 30 years and found that consuming about five to 10 grams of alcohol daily (equivalent to about three to six glasses of wine per week) raised the risk of breast cancer by 15 percent. In absolute numbers, however, the increased risk does not rise to the level of alarm. For instance, the typical five-year breast cancer risk for a 50-year-old woman is 3 percent; that risk would jump to only 3.45 percent, according to the study results.

It’s also important to keep in mind that, since the study was observational (as opposed to a randomized controlled study), it cannot prove cause and effect. Therefore, ACSH’s Dr. Ruth Kava advises that women should balance the risks and benefits when it comes to drinking alcohol. If you know that you have an increased risk of heart disease, but no increased risk of breast cancer, you probably don’t need to be concerned about drinking a moderate amount of alcohol, she says. As with most such choices, an individualized analysis of one’s risks and benefits should outweigh blanket recommendations."

But Dr. Tim Byers of the Colorado School of Public Health is more direct: "For most women at average risk for both conditions, he says, the balance favors heart disease (i.e., moderate drinking has a net benefit), as heart disease is much more common than breast cancer; but for women at high risk for breast cancer that balance shifts."


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