HEALTH BASICS

Wine and heart health

Wine contains alcohol, which can affect blood pressure, heart rhythm, and overall heart risk.

WHAT IT IS
The relationship between drinking wine and cardiovascular health

WHERE IT COMES UP
Alcohol choices, heart-risk discussions, blood pressure, and medication reviews

WHY IT MATTERS
Alcohol can change blood pressure, heart rhythm, and disease risk

WHAT IT IS NOT
Not a disease or a heart treatment

WHO TO ASK
Primary care clinician, cardiologist, pharmacist, or alcohol support service

HOW IT IS CHECKED
No test; blood pressure and heart tests assess related harm

Overview

Wine is an alcoholic drink. Most of its health effects come from ethanol, the same type of alcohol found in beer and spirits.

Some studies have found lower rates of coronary heart disease among people who report drinking small amounts of wine or other alcohol. Coronary heart disease involves narrowing of the blood vessels that supply the heart. These studies do not prove that wine caused the lower risk.

People who drink small amounts may differ from non-drinkers in income, diet, exercise, smoking, healthcare access, or existing health conditions. Some non-drinkers also stopped drinking because they became unwell. These differences can make alcohol appear more protective than it is.

More recent research, including studies that use genetic information, has questioned whether low alcohol intake protects the heart. Alcohol can raise blood pressure, trigger abnormal heart rhythms, and contribute to other health problems. It also increases the risk of several cancers.

Wine is therefore not a heart treatment. If you do not drink alcohol, health organizations do not advise starting for possible heart benefits.

How it works

After you drink wine, alcohol passes into your bloodstream. Your liver breaks down most of it, but this takes time. Alcohol can affect the heart, blood vessels, brain, and other organs while it circulates.

In the short term, alcohol may widen some blood vessels. This can create a feeling of warmth, but it does not mean circulation is healthier. It may also increase heart rate or make blood pressure less stable.

Regular drinking can raise blood pressure. Higher blood pressure makes the heart work harder and increases the risk of heart attack, stroke, heart failure, and kidney disease.

Alcohol can affect the heart's electrical system. It may trigger atrial fibrillation, an irregular and often fast heart rhythm, even in some people without known heart disease. Larger amounts consumed over a short period appear especially likely to cause rhythm problems.

Long-term high alcohol intake can weaken heart muscle. This is called alcoholic cardiomyopathy. A weakened heart may not pump blood effectively.

Alcohol can also raise triglycerides, a type of fat measured in the blood. It adds calories and may contribute to weight gain, both of which can influence heart risk.

Red wine contains plant compounds called polyphenols, including resveratrol. Laboratory research has explored whether these compounds help blood vessels. However, wine has not been shown to be a reliable way to obtain a heart benefit. Similar plant compounds are available from foods such as grapes, berries, and nuts without exposure to alcohol.

Why it matters for your health

Your heart risk is shaped by many factors. These include blood pressure, cholesterol, smoking, diabetes, physical activity, sleep, family history, and age. Wine does not cancel out these risks or replace established treatment.

The amount and pattern of drinking matter. A large amount on one occasion can affect the heart differently from the same amount spread over time. Glass size and alcohol strength also matter. A generous serving or strong wine may contain more alcohol than you expect.

In the United States, one standard drink contains about 14 grams of pure alcohol. This is approximately 5 fluid ounces, or 148 millilitres, of wine at 12% alcohol by volume. Standard-drink definitions differ between countries. Many wine glasses hold more than one standard serving.

Your personal circumstances matter as well. Alcohol may be more concerning if you have high blood pressure, atrial fibrillation, heart failure, liver disease, high triglycerides, or difficulty controlling how much you drink. It can interact with medicines and may increase dizziness, sleepiness, bleeding, or other effects, depending on the medicine.

Heart health is not the only consideration. Alcohol is linked to cancers including breast, mouth, throat, voice box, oesophagus, liver, and bowel cancer. Cancer risk can increase even at relatively low levels of drinking.

What can go wrong

Wine itself is not a disease. Drinking alcohol can, however, contribute to or complicate specific conditions:

Arrange routine medical follow-up if you notice repeated palpitations, higher blood pressure readings, reduced exercise tolerance, or difficulty cutting down. These concerns have many possible causes and need individual assessment.

Seek emergency help for chest pressure or pain, severe breathing difficulty, fainting, or signs of stroke such as facial drooping, arm weakness, or sudden speech trouble. Also seek emergency help if someone who has been drinking cannot be woken, has slow or irregular breathing, has a seizure, or repeatedly vomits while barely responsive. Do not assume these signs will pass as the alcohol wears off.

- High blood pressure: Regular alcohol use can raise blood pressure or make it harder to control
- Atrial fibrillation: Alcohol may trigger episodes of an irregular heart rhythm
- Cardiomyopathy: Long-term high intake can weaken the heart muscle
- Heart failure: Alcohol may worsen symptoms or contribute to heart muscle damage
- Stroke: Raised blood pressure and atrial fibrillation can both increase stroke risk
- High triglycerides: Alcohol can increase this type of blood fat
- Alcohol poisoning: A large amount over a short time can suppress breathing and consciousness
- Alcohol dependence and withdrawal: Regular heavy use can lead to physical dependence; sudden stopping may then be dangerous
- Cancer and liver disease: These risks are important even though they are not heart conditions

What you can do

There is no test that can show whether wine is protecting your heart. Blood pressure readings, cholesterol and triglyceride tests, heart rhythm recordings, and liver tests can identify some related concerns, but they do not measure a heart benefit from wine.

Practical steps include:

If you do not drink, there is no heart-health reason to begin.

If you want to reduce or stop, support is available through primary care and alcohol support services. If you drink heavily most days or have previously experienced shaking, sweating, anxiety, hallucinations, or seizures when cutting down, seek medical advice before stopping suddenly. Alcohol withdrawal may require supervised care.

Do not drink before driving, operating machinery, or doing activities where slower reactions could cause harm. Avoid alcohol during pregnancy. People taking interacting medicines or living with certain medical conditions may also be advised not to drink.

- Check the alcohol percentage and bottle size on the label
- Measure your usual serving once so you know how much the glass holds
- Keep a record of drinking days, serving sizes, and reasons for drinking
- Record any palpitations, dizziness, poor sleep, or blood pressure changes
- Ask a pharmacist whether alcohol interacts with your medicines
- Ask whether alcohol could be affecting atrial fibrillation, blood pressure, triglycerides, or heart failure
- Ask about a brief alcohol screening questionnaire, such as AUDIT-C, if you are concerned about your intake

Common questions

Is red wine better for the heart than white wine?

There is no good evidence that red wine should be used to protect the heart. Red wine contains more of some plant compounds, but it also contains alcohol. Foods such as grapes, berries, and nuts provide plant compounds without alcohol.

Does one glass a day prevent heart attacks?

Research has not established that one daily glass prevents heart attacks. Earlier observational studies suggested an association, but lifestyle differences and other biases may explain part of

it. Alcohol can also raise other health risks.

Is wine safer than beer or spirits?

The main risk comes from the amount of ethanol consumed, not simply the type of drink. Serving size and alcohol strength can make one glass of wine equal to more than one standard drink.

Can I drink wine if I have a heart condition?

There is no single answer for every heart condition. Ask the clinician managing your care how alcohol relates to your diagnosis, medicines, blood pressure, and heart rhythm. Do not stop prescribed heart medicines in order to drink.

Is alcohol-free wine a heart-health product?

No. It is a beverage, not a treatment. It usually contains much less alcohol, although some products contain a small amount. Check the label if you need to avoid alcohol completely. Sugar and calorie content also differ between products.

Sources

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