

# Is Alcohol Healthy In Moderation? Benefits & Dangers



From boozy New Year's Eve parties to a quiet chat with friends after dinner, alcohol plays a regular part in most of our lives.

Almost all of us agree that heavy alcohol consumption is harmful. Consequences like cirrhosis and addiction issues support that position.

But what about moderate alcohol consumption? Is it still dangerous?

You've probably seen your fair share of news stories discussing how it's actually good for you. There's an astonishing amount of research out there. The truth, as usual, lies somewhere in the middle.

## A Long (and Complicated) Relationship

Humans have enjoyed alcohol for thousands of years. But we didn't have the technology to produce it in massive quantities until the Neolithic era - between 5,000 and 10,000 years ago.

Our hunter-gatherer ancestors sometimes found fermented fruit juice and drank it for the alcoholic effects. Sometimes they even let fruit ferment intentionally, making the first crude versions of wine. The technology to process grains into beers and spirits came later.

We've had an intimate relationship with alcohol ever since. These are some of the most studied beverages around, but there's an enormous amount of conflicting information. Pick two people off the street, and one will endorse alcohol wholeheartedly while the other will say it ruins your health.

It's easy to see why one might be concerned. Ethanol (the type of alcohol we drink) is a toxin when consumed in high enough amounts. An enzyme called dehydrogenase processes it in our liver by converting it into acetaldehyde.

Before you balk at the idea completely, you should consider that exposure to low levels of stress can actually be beneficial for your health. Numerous studies have linked cold showers to a faster metabolism, better mood, and stronger immune system.

## **Digging into the Health Effects**

Because there's so much information out there regarding alcohol and its health, sorting through it all can be a challenge.

Now is a great opportunity to explore what the science says. I'll break it down by types of alcoholic drink to make them easier to compare.

### **Wine**

Wine is made by fermenting different types of fruits (usually grapes). Once the fruits ripen, we harvest them and mash them into juice. The natural sugars act as the perfect food source for yeast during the fermentation process.

Because we foraged for fruits long before cultivating grains, our first experience with alcohol was probably naturally-fermented wines from overripe fruits. It was only a matter of time before we started growing fruits for that purpose and perfected the process with technology.

One of wine's strongest selling points (from a health perspective) is its antioxidants. Antioxidants help protect the body against damage from free radicals, which lead to everything from premature aging and neurological issues, to increased risk of stroke and heart disease.

Wine's most famous antioxidant is resveratrol, which has been linked to improved heart health. Numerous studies have noted that moderate red wine consumption led to increased HDL (good) cholesterol, decreased platelet aggregation in the blood, and fought off inflammation. This might explain the "French paradox," the inverse correlation between wine intake and mortality rates from coronary diseases.

A study published in the journal JAMA Internal Medicine, however, tracked resveratrol levels in almost 800 Italians for nine years and found no links between resveratrol metabolites and risk of death. The researchers left open the possibility that a different antioxidant in wine might actually promote the health effects.

Choose red wines for the healthiest effects. They contain slightly less natural sugars than white wines, more nutrients, and the biggest antioxidant punch.

If you're sensitive to gluten, you're in the clear with wine. Unlike beer, it doesn't contain gluten because it's made from fruits, not grains.



## Beer

We have a long and colorful history of beer drinking. People have been brewing beer all around the world since the days of ancient Egypt. Maybe even earlier.

There are a ton of different types of beers available. If you've been to the store lately, you've probably noticed all the options filling an entire aisle. But practically every beer, whether it's a weak light brew or an IPA so strong it will make you forget your own name, is made from grains like wheat and barley. Sugars and yeast are added to kick off the fermentation process.

But is drinking beer healthy?

A massive six-year study of over 80,000 adults found that, while levels of HDL (good) cholesterol declined over time, it declined the slowest among people who drank a moderate amount (one to two drinks for men, and one for women) of beer daily. This suggests a heart-protective effect.

More research focused on hops, which give beer its bitter taste, and found they helped fight inflammation. A meta-analysis of 16 different studies found that drinking beer in moderation had a similar health-protecting effect as drinking

wine. People who drank around one pint daily reduced their risk of heart disease by 33 percent.

The issue isn't settled, though. A meta-analysis of alcohol consumption and mortality rates pointed out that in many studies, the non-drinking participants may have been abstaining due to a health condition or because they were recovering alcoholics. This might skew the data by making the drinkers look healthier by comparison.

One major bummer is that practically every beer contains gluten. If that's something you're trying to avoid, consider a different type of alcohol or a beer alternative. There are a few gluten-free options available, and we can expect more to pop up to cater to the health trend.

Hard cider is another option because it's made from fruits instead of grains. Just read the labels carefully to make sure you don't pick a brand with an extremely high sugar content.

Craft beers are super popular these days - with no signs of slowing down. They're delicious and, with so many options to choose from, there's always a new one to try. Unfortunately, they're also some of the worst alcoholic drinks you can have for your health.

Craft beer favorites like pale ales, Imperial pale ales (IPAs), stouts, and porters don't just have a higher alcohol content, they're also packed with more calories and carbohydrates.

## **Spirits**

Most spirits are made from grains. This makes them similar to beer in some respects. But the major difference is that, after the fermentation process, the grains are distilled before they're bottled and sold.

Distillation results in a much higher alcohol content. That's why just 1.5 ounces of a spirit is considered the equivalent to an entire beer or glass of wine.

One cool aspect of this process is that distillation strips away the gluten you'd find in other grain-based alcoholic drinks (like beers). This makes it a better choice if you'd rather avoid gluten.

There's a big caveat, though. Some people switch to spirits because they consider them healthier than beer or wine. But the effects can be disastrous if they always have them with soft drinks or other sugary mixers. With so many sugars and artificial sweeteners working their way into processed foods, the last thing most of us need is more.

If you opt for spirits when you drink, try to stick to ice, citrus fruits, club soda, or other non-sweet mixers for the best effects on your health.

Research has noted similar effects of moderate spirit consumption to wine and beer drinking. Many of them, including brandy, bourbon, and cognac, contain antioxidants that help protect the heart.

How do you choose which spirit to drink?

Here's a general guideline to remember: dry, clear spirits are probably less harmful than darker spirits because they're distilled from less sugary sources. Tequila (made from 100 percent agave) or gin (made from botanicals) drink beats out dark rum made from fermented sugarcane.

If you have any doubts, just check the labels beforehand. Per serving, most spirits have a similar amount of calories as beer and wine. But we have to remember that serving size is only 1.5 ounces. It's easy to overdo it if you like sugary stuff. Just one serving of coffee liqueur has around 180 calories!

## **So Is Alcohol Healthy?**

With the amount of research available, it's easy to cherry-pick studies and make a case for or against alcohol.

The reality?

If you enjoy it in moderation, it's unlikely that alcohol will make a significant impact on your health.

This is a personal decision - and one that comes down to your health and fitness goals. If you're desperately trying to lose weight, for instance, you're best off avoiding it (at least for now). On the other hand, if you're happy with

how you look and feel, having a glass of wine or two with dinner probably isn't an issue.

There's absolutely no reason why you must drink alcohol to improve your health. You can get all the nutrients your body needs from a well-balanced diet.

For most of us, the ideal solution isn't to cut out alcohol completely. It's to find smart ways to work it into a healthy lifestyle. The types of alcoholic beverages you choose matter. Watch out for sugary mixed drinks, and avoid beer if you're sensitive to gluten.

If you are unsure whether to keep drinking or stop, you could always do a 30-day sobriety trial and see how you feel.

## **Over to You**

The sheer amount of information about alcohol's effects on health is dizzying. Hardly a day goes by without a new article or blog post being published on the topic.

Hopefully, the studies above gave you a balanced view of the information to make the best decision for you.

Do you drink alcohol? If so, have you ever stopped for a while and noticed any significant effects? Leave a comment below and let us know!