

ALCOHOL CONSUMPTION AND CARDIOPROTECTION: MODERATION IS THE KEY

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Abstract

Cardiovascular diseases are the leading cause of global morbidity and mortality. Besides inflicting tremendous human suffering, they also result in huge direct and indirect financial costs on the worldwide society. With the ready availability of affordable therapeutics globally, and the relative lack of newer innovations, lifestyle interventions are gaining importance to further control this epidemic. Low to moderate alcohol intake is consistently and strongly related with lower risk of cardiovascular disease incidence and mortality. However, most studies indicate that heavy drinking has a detrimental effect. This paper reviews the effects of alcohol consumption on several cardiovascular diseases.

Keywords: Alcohol, Cardiovascular Diseases, Coronary Artery Disease, HTN, Stroke

Introduction:

Alcohol is a popular drink [1]. It is estimated that almost 2 billion people across the world consume alcoholic drinks [2]. In 2016, 32.5% of the world population were current drinkers with an intake of one or more alcoholic drinks in the past 12 months [3].

The effects of alcohol on health can vary depending on the amount (low-to-moderate versus heavy consumption) and pattern of intake [4]. Moderate alcohol intake is considered as two standard drinks a day for men and one standard drink a day for women [5]. Binge drinking is

considered as 4 or more drinks for women and 5 or more drinks for men in one sitting or over 2 hours [6]. Compulsive alcohol intake leads to alcohol use disorder (AUD) [7]. Although low to moderate alcohol intake may have some beneficial effects on cardiovascular diseases (CVDs), alcohol consumption, in general, is associated with several negative health consequences [8-21]. Alcohol can cause several liver diseases, such as fatty liver, hepatitis, and cirrhosis, digestive problems such as pancreatitis, cancers of the breast, mouth, throat, esophagus, liver, and colon

and mental health disorders, such as depression and anxiety [8-10]. Alcoholics also experience learning and memory problems and are at a higher risk of becoming demented [11]. They are more prone to injuries, such as motor vehicle crashes, falls, drownings, and burns, and more likely to be involved in homicide, suicide, sexual assault, and intimate partner violence [12-13]. They also tend to participate in risky sexual behaviors (such as unprotected sex or sex with multiple partners), which can result in unintended pregnancy or sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV [14]. They often face social problems, family disturbances, and unemployment [15,16]. Drinking alcohol during pregnancy can increase the risk of miscarriage, stillbirth, or fetal alcohol spectrum disorders in the offspring [17,18]. Children of parents with alcohol or drug use disorders are more likely to be involved in drugs and often suffer from behavioral and mental problems [19]. Alcohol may also weaken the immune system, making alcoholics more prone to contracting infectious diseases like pneumonia and tuberculosis [20]. In 2012, alcohol was responsible for 139 million net DALYs (disability-adjusted life years), or 5.1% of the global burden of disease and injury [21]. Alcohol consumption also increases mortality from several diseases, including certain cancers [22]. During 2012, about 3.3 million deaths, or 5.9% of all global deaths, were attributed to alcohol consumption [23].

The health effects of alcohol on CVD appear to be J or U-shaped, with low to moderate doses being beneficial compared to no alcohol intake, while heavy intake being harmful [23,24]. It is estimated that 19% of all alcohol-related deaths are cardiovascular. [22]

Discussion:

CVDs include coronary artery disease/coronary heart disease (CAD/CHD), high blood pressure (HTN), stroke, heart failure (HF), cardiac arrhythmias (including atrial fibrillation (AF) and sudden cardiac death or SCD), peripheral arterial disease (PAD), venous thromboembolism (VTE), and vasculogenic erectile dysfunction (ED) [25]. CVDs impart enormous human suffering and are associated with a significant reduction in the quality of life [26]. CVDs are also a leading cause of mortality worldwide [27]. It is estimated that the number of global CVD deaths will rise to 20 million by 2030 [28]. Health-related direct and indirect

costs of CVDs are enormous and continue to climb [29].

Alcohol intake has consistently shown a J- or U-shaped relationship with several cardiovascular diseases [23,24]. Light to moderate alcohol intake has been associated with a lower risk of coronary artery disease (CAD), heart failure, as well as CVD mortality [30]. On the other hand, heavy consumption has been associated with deleterious CVD outcomes, including increased mortality [31]. Binge drinking and AUD are also harmful to the cardiovascular system [32,33].

Several mechanisms are involved in the noted benefit of low dose intake on CVDs [34]. Alcohol appears to enhance endothelial function by increasing the production of nitric oxide in healthy subjects [35]. Alcohol intake also raises high-density lipoprotein cholesterol and apolipoprotein A-I, which are inversely associated with the risk of occlusive arterial disease [36]. Alcohol beneficially alters the atherosclerotic plaque composition and induce stabilization [37]. Alcohol also exerts several effects on factors involved in hemostasis, such as inhibition of platelet aggregation, lowering of fibrinogen and plasma viscosity as well as increasing the levels of tissue plasminogen activator [38-41]. Low to moderate consumption of alcohol also tends to reduce blood pressure (BP), improve insulin sensitivity, and reduce fasting insulin resistance, - both HTN and DM are major risk factors for occlusive arterial disease [42-44]. Inflammation, a major player in cardiovascular diseases, is lowered with moderate alcohol consumption, while higher intake induces oxidative stress and increases systemic inflammatory markers [45,46]. Although the major driver behind the beneficial CVD effects is ethanol, some alcoholic beverages, like red wine, are high in polyphenols which also provide antioxidant, anti-inflammatory, and antiplatelet effects [47,48].

Some questions have been raised regarding the beneficial effects of alcohol on CVD - most studies have not ruled out the contribution from healthy lifestyles and social behavior that may be present in these drinkers [49]. Secondly, non-drinkers may also have higher morbidity and mortality due to pre-existing CVD or other diseases, (and become 'quitters' or die prematurely) thereby confounding the benefits of alcohol intake [50,51]. Recent Mendelian randomization studies using genetic

polymorphisms have also questioned the beneficial association of low-moderate drinking with the cardiovascular system [52].

Alcohol and HTN:

The relationship between alcohol intake and hypertension is well studied [53-56]. Briasoulis et al, in their meta-analysis, found that consumption of <10g/day of alcohol in women appeared to have a protective effect on hypertension, while a consumption of 21 to 30 g/day significantly increased the risk of hypertension [53]. MacMahon analyzed 29 cross-sectional studies and 6 prospective studies from populations from North America, Australia, Japan, Europe, and New Zealand and found a significant positive association between hypertension and alcohol consumption [54]. They estimated that intake of 3 to 4 drinks per day increased the prevalence of hypertension by 50% when compared with non-drinkers and an intake of 6 to 7 drinks per day, increased the prevalence by 100% [54]. This alcohol-related hypertension risk is J-shaped in women while it is linear in men [55,56]. Binge drinking (drinking more than 5 standard drinks in a single sitting) raises the systolic BP from 4 to 7 mmHg and the diastolic BP from 4 to 6 mmHg, in the short term [57]. These elevations are significant as even a 2-mmHg increase in BP increases mortality from coronary artery disease by 7 percent and from stroke by 10 percent [58,59]. Most professional associations including the American Society of Hypertension and the International Society of Hypertension recommend that men limit their alcohol consumption to no more than 2 drinks a day, and women to no more than 1 drink a day [60].

Alcohol consumption can cause HTN by causing endothelial dysfunction, vasoconstriction, sympathetic activation, and activation of the renin-angiotensin-aldosterone system [61,62]. Alcohol intake also contributes to obesity, chronic renal disease, obstructive sleep apnea, and high insulin resistance - all known risk factors for the development of hypertension [63-66]. Alcohol withdrawal, by triggering a severe sympathetic response, can dangerously elevate BP levels [67]. Reduction in alcohol intake to <2 alcoholic drinks per day reduces blood pressure in a dose-response manner [68].

Alcohol and CAD/CHD:

The relationship between alcohol consumption and CAD/CHD has been extensively investigated [69,70]. A meta-analysis done by Bagnardi and colleagues found that there is a lower risk of CHD in regular low-moderate drinkers [71]. Another study reported that alcohol consumption between <1 standard drink/day to ~5 drinks/day was cardioprotective for CHD mortality [72]. Mostofsky and colleagues conducted a systematic review and meta-analysis of 23 studies and found that within a week after moderate alcohol consumption, there was a lower risk of myocardial infarction [73]. The cardioprotective benefit of low to moderate alcohol use has also been noted in a Mendelian randomization study [74]. The relationship between CHD and alcohol is however harmful if alcohol consumption is high [71-74]. In a meta-analysis done by Bagnardi and colleagues, the risk of CHD is higher in binge and heavy drinkers, when compared with non-drinkers [71]. Mostofsky and colleagues found that within a week after heavy alcohol consumption, there is a higher risk of myocardial infarction [73]. A recent Mendelian randomization study documented that increased alcohol consumption was associated with an increased risk of subclinical coronary atherosclerosis [75]. The harmful effects on CAD/CHD with a higher intake of alcohol occur, despite there being a tendency for a 10% increase in HDL-C levels and a 14% reduction in fibrinogen levels with its consumption [76]. Overall, most studies find the relationship between alcohol intake and the risk of CAD/CHD is U or J shaped. [77-79]

The 'French Paradox' suggested that the polyphenols found in red wine may be responsible for the lower CAD seen in the Mediterranean red wine drinking population [80]. However, a systematic review of 25 studies did not find a consistent pattern of a CAD/CHD benefit with a specific beverage type [81]. It appears that the observed lower risk of CAD is mainly from the ethanol content of alcoholic drinks [47].

Alcohol and Stroke:

Alcohol has a J-shaped relationship with stroke. Reynolds and group in 2003, in a meta-analysis, found that although consumption of 24 g/day was associated with a reduction in ischemic stroke when compared with abstainers, consumption of

more than 60g/day resulted in an increased risk of ischemic stroke by 69% and hemorrhagic stroke by 118%.[82]. In a systematic review of 37 studies, Feigin and colleagues noted that drinking more than 150 g of ethanol a week doubled the risk of subarachnoid hemorrhage [83]. Ronksley and his group found that the risk of stroke was increased by 69% with consumption of >4 drinks per day [84]. In a systematic review of 37 studies, Zhang and colleagues reported that consumption of 0 to 20g/day of alcohol (<2 drinks per day) was associated with a reduced risk for all types of stroke and stroke-related mortality [85]. However, drinking more than 2 drinks a day resulted in an increased risk of stroke and all stroke-related outcomes [85]. In a more recent systemic review and meta-analysis of 27 prospective studies, Larsson et al. reported that light to moderate alcohol consumption (1-2 drinks/day) was associated with a lower risk of ischemic stroke, whereas high (>2-4 drinks/day) and heavy drinking (>4 drinks/day) was associated with an increased risk, especially of hemorrhagic stroke [86]. Genetic factors may also play a role. Holmes and colleagues in a Mendelian randomization study found that individuals with the A allele variant ADH1BrS1229984 consumed less alcohol and had a reduced risk of ischemic stroke compared with noncarriers [52]. Other, more recent studies have also implicated genetic influence and demonstrate that heavy alcohol consumption is associated with a greater risk of stroke [87,88]. Overall, it appears that although 1 to 2 drinks per day may have no effect on or a slight reduction in stroke events, greater daily alcohol consumption increases the risk for stroke

Alcohol and Heart Failure:

The effects of alcohol on heart failure are not clear. Larsen et al. in a meta-analysis determined that consumption of 7 drinks/week was associated with a 17 percent lower risk of developing heart failure [89]. Wannamethee and colleagues did not find any protective benefit on incident heart failure in an older population with light-moderate drinking. They also reported that heavier drinking (≥ 5 drinks/day or ≥ 35 drinks/week) significantly increased the risk for heart failure [90]. However, a recent Mendelian randomization study suggests that higher alcohol consumption in heart failure may not be as dangerous as previously presumed [91]. At this time, however, it can only be said that

low levels of alcohol consumption are safe in patients with heart failure and may even be beneficial in heart failure due to CHD.

Alcohol and Arrhythmias:

The causal relationship between alcohol intake and atrial fibrillation has been known for a long time [92]. An alcohol binge causing AF (often referred to as the "holiday heart syndrome") in healthy people is well known [93]. Alcohol not only may directly affect the heart but also is related to obesity, sleep-disordered breathing, and hypertension, all of which contribute to an increased risk of AF [94]. According to Koskinen and group, 5%-10% of all new episodes of atrial fibrillation are related to alcohol use [95]. Most cases of SCD are due to malignant ventricular arrhythmias [96]. Alcohol also plays a significant role in SCD [97,98]. In a study of the Finnish population, Perkiömäki and colleagues determined that 4 of 10 victims of unexpected SCD had evidence of alcohol intake before the fatal event [99].

Alcohol and Cardiomyopathy:

Although heart failure is commonly due to hypertensive or ischemic cardiovascular disease, alcohol may also cause alcoholic cardiomyopathy - a progressive heart chamber dilatation leading to heart failure [100,101]. These patients are more likely to develop atrial fibrillation and malignant ventricular arrhythmias [102,103]. In long-term follow-up studies, a mortality rate of 10% of patients/year has been observed in the group of patients with persistent high-dose ethanol consumption due to progression of cardiomyopathy and occurrence of malignant arrhythmias [104,105].

Alcohol and Valvular Diseases/Aortic Aneurysm:

Some earlier studies have indicated that low to moderate levels of alcohol consumption is associated with a smaller abdominal aortic diameter and alcohol helps reduce mortality due to aortic disease [106,107]. However, later studies have documented a higher risk for the development of abdominal aortic aneurysm with alcohol consumption [108,108]. In a recent population-based study, alcohol-related diseases were associated with a nearly 2.4-fold increased incidence of abdominal aortic aneurysm, after

adjusting for age, gender, and comorbidities [110]. In another recent study, regular alcohol consumption was noted to increase the aortic root diameter [111].

Alcohol and Congenital Heart Disease:

Many child-bearing-age women consume alcohol during pregnancy, intentionally or unintentionally, thereby increasing the potential risk for congenital diseases in the offspring. In a meta-analysis of 23 studies, Wen and the group found no association between maternal alcohol intake during pregnancy and the risk of congenital heart disease in the offspring [112]. Another study also reached similar conclusions, with low-to-moderate alcohol consumption during pregnancy, having no significant adverse impact on congenital heart defects in the offspring [113]. However, some studies suggest that prenatal alcohol exposure may be teratogenic and cause several kinds of heart defects (aberrant great vessels, conotruncal anomalies, atrial septal defects, and ventricular septal defects) [114-116]. A recent meta-analysis of 55 studies concluded that maternal alcohol consumption may increase the risk of congenital heart disease in the offspring [117]. Offspring born with congenital heart disease are living longer and these survivors appear to be drinking more alcohol than the general population [118,119].

Alcohol and Heart Transplant:

The data on the use of donor hearts from patients with a previous history of alcoholism is unclear. Freimark and his associates found that heart transplant patients experienced poor survival when compared to those who received donor hearts from non-alcoholics [120]. However, a later study found that donor hearts from chronic alcoholics were associated with a better survival rate in transplant patients compared to non-alcohol-related donor heart transplants [121]. In a recent study of 370 heart transplant patients, Newman and colleagues reported that alcohol abuse did not appear to impact rejection, cardiac allograft vasculopathy, or intermediate-term survival [122]. The transplanted patients however did experience an increased incidence of post-transplantation atrial fibrillation and impaired cardiac allograft diastolic function [122].

Alcohol and PAD:

Several studies have noted an inverse relationship between moderate alcohol intake and PAD [123,124]. Evaluating results from the Cardiovascular Health Study, Mukamal and colleagues found that drinking 1 to 13 drinks/week resulted in a lower risk of hospitalization due to PAD [125]. In 2011, Garcia-Diaz and colleagues reported in a study of 1073 patients from the FRENA registry, lower all-cause mortality, and lower cardiovascular mortality rates in alcohol drinkers with PAD compared to non-drinkers [126]. However, as with most other cardiovascular diseases, high levels of alcohol intake are associated with an increased risk of PAD. [127] This has been confirmed by a recent Mendelian study [128].

Alcohol and Erectile Dysfunction:

Wang et al, in a meta-analysis, determined that light to moderate alcohol intake (<21 drinks/week) resulted in a decreased risk of erectile dysfunction [129]. This benefit was also reported in diabetic male individuals [130,131]. It is believed that alcohol reduces ED by increasing the bioavailability of NO and thereby improves endothelial function in vasculogenic ED.

Alcohol and Venous Disease:

The data on the effects of alcohol intake on VTE is not clear. VTE benefits from alcohol intake were reported in men who drank between four to 14 drinks per week [132]. In a cohort of older women (The Iowa Women's Health Study), greater intake of alcohol was associated with a lower risk of incident VTE [133]. Patients with chronic liver disease, especially when due to excessive alcohol consumption, exhibit a low prevalence of VTE during hospitalization [134]. Similarly, a lower risk of DVT is noted in trauma patients with a history of chronic alcohol consumption [135,136]. Some data, however, suggests otherwise. Alcohol consumption of ≥ 3 units of liquor per week (One unit = approximately 14 grams of alcohol.) revealed a 53% increased risk of VTE compared to teetotalers in analysis, after adjusting for other potentially confounding factors [137]. In patients with AUD, an increase in the risk of VTE has also been noted [138]. Overall, the literature has studies reporting both benefits and harmful effects regarding VTE with alcohol intake. In a recent meta-analysis (10 prospective studies with a total of 441,128 individuals and 10,221 VTE

cases), Chen et al. found no relationship between alcohol intake and the risk of VTE [139].

Alcohol and other CVD risk factors:

Alcohol consumption in more than moderate amounts is also associated with many other CVD risk factors, such as sleep disorders, chronic kidney disease, weight gain, depression, and smoking [140-144].

Conclusion:

The effects of alcohol consumption on the cardiovascular system can be a double-edged sword. For low to moderate drinkers, alcohol consumption appears to be safe and often associated with a decreased risk of most CVDs. However, excess alcohol intake is associated with adverse cardiovascular outcomes. The Dietary Guidelines for Americans recommends that alcohol intake be limited to two standard drinks a day for men and one standard drink a day for women. Since it is extremely difficult to predict who may become an excessive drinker, it is recommended that non-drinking individuals not start drinking alcohol for potential cardiovascular benefits. Other healthy lifestyles, and the absence of other diseases that may induce ‘quitting’ or even premature death, may also play a role in the observed benefits of low to moderate alcohol intake on cardiovascular diseases. And finally, there appears to be no lower threshold for overall health harm, as even low-dose alcohol tends to increase morbidity and mortality from many other diseases.

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