

health benefits of alcohol

A number of health benefits are now being linked with drinking alcohol **at low risk levels**. Most important of these is the protection that alcohol can provide against heart disease in people from middle age onwards:

- Maximum benefit in helping to prevent heart disease comes from a regular pattern of drinking relatively small amounts of alcohol:
 - less than 1 standard drink a day for women aged from about 45-40 years and over, and
 - 1 to 2 standard drinks per day for men aged from about 40-50 years and over.
- However, people who choose not to drink can get similar benefits from strategies such as regular exercise, giving up smoking, and a healthy diet.
- It is also important to note that:
 - A similar benefit has not been found for younger age groups.
 - More variable drinking patterns, especially involving large amounts of alcohol, may actually increase the risk of illness and death from heart disease.

REGARDING OTHER ILLNESSES

- There is strong evidence that **low risk drinking** may similarly provide some protection against ischaemic stroke, and that consumption of alcohol may provide some protection against gallstones.
- While more research is needed, there is some early evidence that low risk drinking may provide some protection against Type 2 diabetes.

HEART DISEASE AND THE PROTECTIVE EFFECTS OF ALCOHOL

There is now strong evidence about the benefits of alcohol in providing partial protection against heart disease and heart attack. It is important to note that:

- **This protection applies specifically to ischaemic heart disease:** that is, heart disease that is due to insufficient blood supply to the heart muscle, because the arteries that supply that muscle have become narrowed or blocked by fatty deposits on their walls, causing angina and heart attack.



A SMALL AMOUNT OF ALCOHOL CAN HELP AN OLDER HEART. A LARGE AMOUNT WON'T

- **Both the pattern and the level of drinking need to be taken into account.** Essentially, the evidence suggests that the protective effect comes from a regular pattern of drinking, preferably with meals (to help reduce the high levels of blood lipids or fats found after eating), of a low to moderate amount of alcohol (of less than 1 standard drink per day for women and 1 to 2 per day for men). However, not only are there no additional benefits from drinking larger amounts, but heavy drinking (both binge and long-term) can markedly increase the risk of heart attack.
- **The protection applies only to people in age groups where heart disease is an important cause of death.** In Australia, this begins to occur at 40-45 years in men and 45-50 years in women, and the risk increases with age. There is currently no evidence of a protective effect in younger people, who are more likely to experience the acute risks linked with alcohol consumption – mainly through violence and accidental injury.
- **All, or almost all, of the protective effect appears to be due to the alcohol itself,** not from any other components in the drink. If specific drinks, such as red wine, do provide any additional benefit, this effect is small.



- **There are many good health, family and social reasons why people choose not to drink.** These include personal, cultural and religious considerations. People who choose not to drink alcohol should not be urged to drink to gain any potential health benefit, and should be supported in their decision not to drink.
- **To gain protection against heart disease, nondrinkers can use other strategies,** such as stopping cigarette smoking, increasing exercise, improving diet, or taking small quantities of aspirin. A combination of these approaches achieves better results than any one on its own.

STROKES AND THE EFFECTS OF ALCOHOL

There is considerable evidence that:

- Low-level alcohol consumption may offer some protection against stroke, by reducing the risk of ischaemic stroke (which is due to the sudden blockage of a blood vessel in the brain, and accounts for about 80% of strokes), but not against haemorrhagic stroke (which is due to the rupture of a blood vessel in the brain).
- Heavy drinking is a risk factor for both types of stroke and for increased blood pressure (which is a risk factor for both types of stroke).

ALCOHOL AND ITS POSSIBLE PROTECTIVE EFFECTS ON OTHER CONDITIONS

Alcohol may have a number of other health benefits. Currently:

- There is strong evidence that alcohol consumption may be protective against gallstone production; and
- There is early evidence that low-level alcohol consumption may reduce the risk of Type 2 diabetes, but further research is required to establish whether there is a beneficial effect.



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PRINCIPAL SOURCE

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