Dear Alice,

Do any alcohols have any specific benefits? As in, is tequila better than vodka? And is red wine the best choice because of its antioxidants?

Answer

Dear Reader,

After opening a bottle of wine, French speakers commonly offer a toast, “à votre santé” — to your health. In addition to these well wishes, some evidence suggests moderate amounts of alcohol may provide protective effects against certain health conditions, such as heart disease and diabetes. But before you pour yourself a glass, it might be helpful to know that alcohol has negative health effects, too (which could outweigh the potential benefits). Although research is still a bit muddled to declare it one way or the other, it seems that what you drink matters less than how much it you imbibe. In other words, the more alcohol you consume (especially if it’s in a short period of time), the more likely you are to experience the negative effects. Keep reading for more on what the research says about the benefits of certain types of alcohol and what can be said about alcohol’s impact on health in general.

Getting down to specific types, you may have read that red wine has received a lot of publicity for its potential to improve heart health. As you suggested, researchers link these benefits to the antioxidants present in the form of resveratrol, a plant-based compound in red wine. However, it’s unclear whether it’s resveratrol itself or its interaction with other compounds (in wine or accompanied food) that provides the identified health benefits. Other research indicates similar health benefits for beer drinkers, though research is still in too early a stage to give beer a firm stamp of (health) approval. As far as spirits (such as vodka and tequila) goes, there is less evidence touting any health benefits. In fact, a study showed that spirits may be associated with a higher risk of heart attack among people who drink occasionally (as opposed to regularly).

As with many of life’s pleasures though, enjoying the benefits of alcohol typically requires a healthy dose of moderation. A sip of celebratory champagne or the occasional happy hour drink won't do much to change your overall health. Drink too much, and alcohol can have a myriad of negative effects on physical and mental health, such as heart and liver damage and increased...
risk of cancer, obesity, and depression. The takeaway message here is that alcoholic drinks pose both positive and negative effects to your health, so finding a balance of how much and how often you drink can help you stay on the positive side.

In addition to the health effects of alcohol, you may want to think about your drinking habits. Do you just drink a glass of red wine with a meal or take multiple shots at a party? Do you tend to eat less healthy food when you drink? Do you find yourself smoking cigarettes when alcohol is involved? In addition to the negative health effects associated with cigarettes and unhealthy diet, these behaviors may interact with alcohol in different ways and result in additional concerning effects. For instance, alcohol can contain a lot of calories and can stimulate your appetite. If this happens, and you’re mindlessly snacking at the same time, it can cause spur on weight gain.

If you don’t drink regularly, there’s no need to feel like you’re missing out on potential health benefits. There are plenty of non-alcoholic ways to reduce your risk of heart disease and diabetes, such as eating well-balanced meals and keeping physically active. Even among folks who do drink regularly, there are lots of different factors that affect how each person responds to alcohol and experience health risks or benefits. As such, the American Heart Association does not recommend that you start drinking to improve your health if you don’t already drink alcohol. For more information related to alcohol, check out Alcohol & Other Drugs in the Go Ask Alice! archives.

If you do choose to raise a glass — salud!

Alice!
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Alcohol & Other Drugs
Alcohol

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Resources
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Published date:
Jul 24, 2009
Last reviewed on:
Feb 10, 2017
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