

ALCOHOL, RED WINE AND HEART DISEASES

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There have been recent reports indicating that the revenue generated by the excise department from Alcohol has increased as also that more and more people are taking to wine drinking, specially red wine. One of the reasons attributed to this increase in consumption of wine is the recent publication of the American Heart Association's findings of potential beneficial effects of red wine, besides the onset of winter months. However, nowhere is the caveat attached to this recommendation ever publicized. Just as alcohol has some beneficial effects, it has some harmful effects like:

1. It can lead to high blood pressure
2. It can lead to heart failure
3. Makes diabetes worse because of increased caloric intake
4. Can also lead to irregular rhythms of the heart (The Holiday Heart Syndrome)
5. Can cause damage to liver & pancreas
6. Increase Triglycerides in blood, which can lead to heart attacks and rarely
7. To sudden cardiac death and damage to the unborn child in pregnant mothers.

Besides the above harmful effects, alcohol also leads to obesity and has been shown to be associated with breast cancer, strokes, suicidal tendencies, depression and accidents. So if one has to drink, one should drink in moderation and that is an average of not more than 60ml – 90 ml for men and 30 ml – 60 ml

for women per day, of 100 proof spirits like Whisky, Gin and Rum and not more than 200ml of wine per day.

A notion has been created that drinking red wine is beneficial. Red wine does contain certain components called 'Flavenoids' and other anti oxidants which may be of some benefit, but then these components are present to a very high degree in grapes and other fresh fruits and vegetables and the same benefit can be derived equally by eating plenty of these substances rather than taking alcohol. One of the better known effects of moderate consumption of alcohol is increase in the good cholesterol in the blood (High Density Lipoprotein Cholesterol). This effect is related to the presence of a substance called 'Resveratrol' in alcohol, which also prevents the blood from getting thick and clotting. However, the same benefits can be achieved by regular physical exercises in terms of brisk walking for 20 minutes per day and if medically indicated, taking a tablet of Aspirin every day. It is therefore clearly mandatory for every one to understand that one should not take to alcohol as a health fad because there are alternative modalities to stay fit and healthy which are much more reliable, cheap and safer than alcohol. For after all, there is an extremely fine line between healthy drinking and risky drinking and most of us are liable to lapse in to the latter. Therefore much more reliable methods of controlling and preventing heart diseases are:

1. Control of weight, blood pressure, blood sugar and high cholesterol levels by:
 - a. Regular exercises
 - b. Low fat diet with plenty of green leafy vegetables and fruits
 - c. Not smoking
 - d. Maintaining a normal weight
 - e. Mental relaxation regimes like yoga or meditation

There are upwards of 50 scientific studies published in medical literature which suggest that there is an inverse relationship between mild to moderate alcohol consumption and heart diseases. However, higher intakes of more than 60ml per day of alcohol is associated with increased risks. This beneficial effect has been associated across the board with all kinds of alcoholic beverages but in a few studies, red wine seems to give higher protection than Beer, Whisky, Rum, Gin or Vodka. Whether red wine has advantage over white wine is not conclusively proven but the common perception is that, it does. This fact arises from "The French Paradox", that is despite the dietary habits and consumption of fats being the same, the incidence of death from heart attacks in France is virtually half of that in America and this is presumed to be due to higher intake of red wine in France.

We have traditionally grown up with the dictum – "An apple a day, keeps the doctor away" but the media and certain interested lobbies seem to have circulated a concept that a "glass of red wine a day will keep the heart attack at bay", but there can be nothing further from truth and there is absolutely no justification for non drinkers to start consuming alcohol or wine as a preventive measure, especially with other well proven and safer alternatives being freely available.