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HEALTH

A Little Alcohol Won't Kill You or Make You Stronger

People who drink a little don't die sooner than people who never drank, study shows

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A new study published on Friday joins a body of evidence that shows alcohol does more harm than good. PHOTO: MARTHA ASECIO-RHINE/ZUMA PRESS

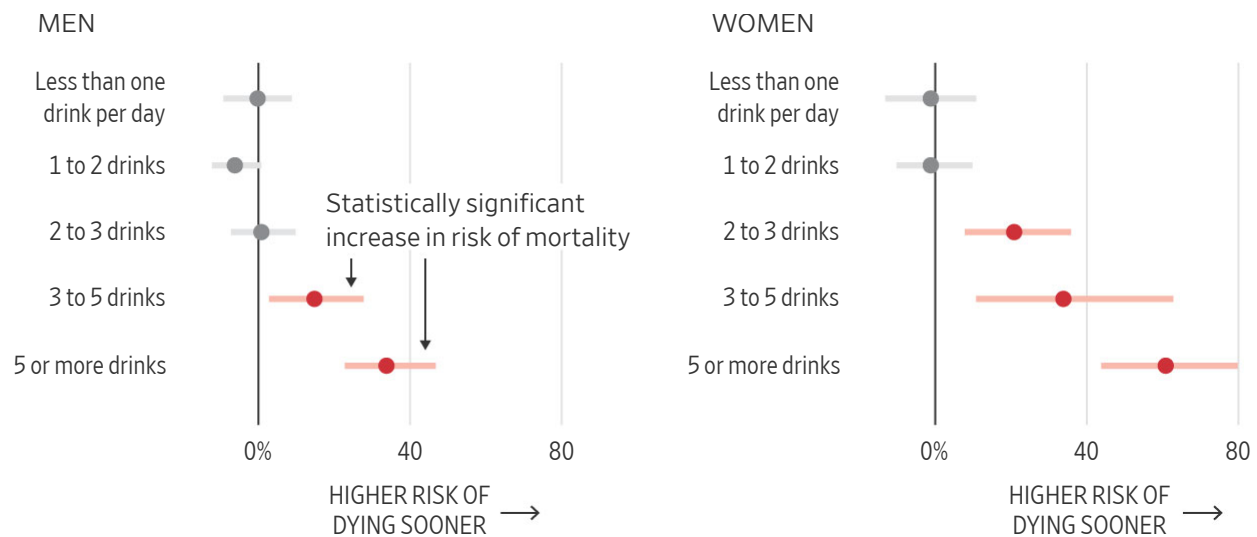
First, the good news: A nip of alcohol here and there probably won't kill you. But it won't help you live longer either.

For a study published Friday in the journal JAMA Network Open, researchers set out to make sense of years of conflicting evidence on alcohol's effect on health. Some research suggested that drinking alcohol improves life expectancy. Other studies had demonstrated poorer health outcomes at any level of drinking.

The researchers analyzed 107 studies on the effect of alcohol in nearly five million people and found that no amount of alcohol consumption led to longer life than among people who never drank. People who drank 45 grams of alcohol or more a day—about as much as in three glasses of wine—increased their risk of dying sooner by up to a third. Among women, anything more than 25 grams of alcohol increased their risk of dying sooner.

“Alcohol is linked to more than 200 diseases. You would be bored by the time I finished naming them all,” said Dr. Jürgen Rehm, senior scientist at Canada’s Centre for Addiction and Mental Health, who wasn’t involved in the study.

Mean relative change in risk of dying sooner due to alcohol consumption compared to lifetime nondrinkers



Note: Bands show 95% confidence interval. Drink volumes are approximations based on a standard drink being 14 grams of pure alcohol, roughly the equivalent of a 12 oz. beer with 5% alcohol content.

Sources: Jinhui Zhao/University of Victoria, JAMA Network Open; National Institutes of Health (alcohol content of standard drink)

The findings suggest that the average man can drink up to about three drinks a day and expect to live as long as nondrinkers. Women might want to stop at about two drinks, the research suggested.

The new study joins a body of evidence that alcohol does more harm than good.

Health officials in Canada this year recommended that people have two drinks or fewer a week to lower health risks. That replaced guidance that 10 drinks a week was a low health risk.

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Rates of deaths involving alcohol in the U.S. rose a record 25% during the pandemic in 2020 and an additional 10% in 2021, according to the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism. Per capita alcohol consumption, measured as gallons of pure alcohol per person, rose 2.9% in 2020, the largest increase in more than 50 years.

Amanda Berger, a vice president at the Distilled Spirits Council of the U.S., a trade association, said alcohol is a lifestyle choice with risks and benefits. “Alcohol can be a part of a balanced diet for most adults,” she said.

Tim Stockwell, director of the Canada Institute for Substance Use Research and an author of the new study, said many studies demonstrating health benefits from alcohol consumption were poorly conducted. For their review, he and his colleagues adjust for recurring flaws in much of that research.