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Women, learn how to drink to your good health

By Susan Flagg Godbey

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There's plenty of evidence suggesting one alcoholic drink a day for most women and up to two for most men can help keep your ticker purring, cutting heart disease risk by as much as 25 to 40 percent.

The ethanol in any type of alcoholic drink raises levels of "good" HDL cholesterol and discourages blood clots. And if you choose wine, you may get an extra benefit, thanks to antioxidants that may discourage a buildup of plaque in artery walls.

But two recent studies suggest alcohol's potent effects can tip from healthy to dangerous in a hurry. While sipping moderately every day did cut heart risk in one recent University of Buffalo study, benefits disappeared for those who overindulged just once a month.

People who got tipsy increased their risk of a heart attack sixfold compared with moderate drinkers. And in a University of Chicago study of 184,418 women, two drinks a day raised the odds of the most common type of breast cancer by 32 percent.

"One drink a day is very different from three drinks on Friday night and four on Saturday night," says Suzanne Thomas, associate professor of psychiatry at the Medical University of South Carolina and a researcher at the university's Charleston Alcohol Research Center. "And women need to remember that alcohol is more toxic for them for several reasons."

Here's what you should know before you drink to

your health.

Q I like to have a glass of wine or two with my husband at dinner. Is it safe? Is it helping

A First, you should know that alcohol's benefits for women's hearts have been studied mostly in women older than 55. For younger women, there's not much evidence it has cardiovascular benefits.

If you're drinking as much as your husband, you're doing yourself a disservice. Alcohol remains in a potent state in women's bodies longer than in men's because we're smaller, we have more body fat and we have lower levels of stomach enzymes that metabolize alcohol.

This increases the risk of damage to your brain, pancreas, liver, heart and breast tissue. If you drink away from home or plan to drive, it raises your risk of having car accidents, too.

Q I worry about breast cancer and about heart health. Should I drink?

A If you're concerned about doing everything you can to lower your risk of breast cancer, you may decide drinking isn't worth the risk.

Alcohol changes the way your body metabolizes the hormone estrogen, which can fuel breast cancer. One recent study found women who have one drink a day increase their risk of cancers that are estrogen- and progesterone-positive by 7 percent, two drinks raised risk by 32 percent and three raised it by 50 percent.

Another new study suggests women who have certain genes that change the way the body breaks down alcohol may be at even higher risk; postmenopausal women with these genes were at double the risk. (There's no test for these genes,

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outside of research studies.)

Are you neglecting your heart if you skip that cocktail? Probably not. Maintaining a healthy weight, getting regular exercise and eating a diet that's rich in fruits, vegetables and whole grains and low in saturated fat are more powerful heart-health strategies.

Q What can you tell me about the danger of "drunkorexia," the trend among young women to try to stay thin by skipping meals before they go out to bars and parties and drink all night?

A Younger women are more prone to binge drinking than older women. There are estimates that 40 percent of women on college campuses binge drink and that one in three also has an eating disorder.

Food slows the absorption of alcohol into the bloodstream, and drinking on an empty stomach is dangerous. Also, young women should be aware that drinking can lead to unsafe sex and to sexual assault. Judgment and reaction time are impaired well before reaching a blood alcohol level of 0.08, the level at which you can be arrested for drunk driving.

Q I enjoy a cocktail or beer but tend to go a little overboard when I'm out with friends. How can I slow down but still have something to sip?

A Befriend the bartender and ask him or her to stretch one drink order over the course of the night.

For example, if you love gin and tonic, each glass you get should contain mostly tonic water and ice and one-third of a normal serving of gin (i.e., 0.5 ounce instead of 1.5 ounces). Thus, you can have three drinks but a single serving of alcohol (which is 1.5 ounces of 80-proof liquor).

Love wine? Do the same with wine spritzers.

Another approach is to start the evening with iced tea or soda, have a drink later on and then switch back to soft drinks before you leave.

This column is written by Susan Flagg Godbey and the editors of Better Health & Living. Check out betterhealthandliving.com for more health news and information.

my heart?

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