Alcohol and Cardiovascular Health: The Dose Makes the Poison or the Remedy

Saint Luke’s Mid America Heart Institute study finds health benefits in daily light to moderate alcohol intake.

Kansas City, MO (PRWEB) February 10, 2014 -- Excessive alcohol use has been linked to cirrhosis, seizures, stroke, poisonings, violence, and cancer, and according to the World Health Organization, kills 2.5 million people each year worldwide. Yet, according to a recent study by Saint Luke’s Mid America Heart Institute, while excessive alcohol use can cause serious health problems, daily light to moderate alcohol use can offer significant health benefits.

The research study was led by Saint Luke’s Mid America Heart Institute cardiologist James H. O’Keefe, M.D., and examined studies over a 15-year period between 1997 and 2012. Researchers reviewed studies focused on alcohol, ethanol, cardiovascular disease, coronary artery disease, heart failure, hypertension, stroke, and mortality. Studies were considered if they were deemed to be of high quality, objective, and methodologically sound. The research findings are published in an online article in the Mayo Clinic Proceedings posted Feb. 10, 2014.

Researchers concluded that habitual light to moderate alcohol intake (up to one drink per day for women and one to two drinks per day for men) is associated with decreased risks for death from any cause, coronary artery disease, congestive heart failure, stroke, and diabetes mellitus. Of the various drinking patterns, daily low to moderate alcohol intake—ideally a glass or two of red wine before or during the evening meal—was linked with the greatest cardiovascular benefit.

By definition, a standard drink is considered to contain 14 g of ethanol which equates to 12 ounces of beer, five ounces of wine, or 1.5 ounces of hard liquor. The study determined that while cardiovascular benefits are associated with light to moderate daily alcohol intake, chronic consumption of more than 2.5 drinks per day for women and 4 drinks per day for men were associated with progressively higher risks for premature death, stroke, heart attack, atrial fibrillation, and heart failure. In addition, younger individuals (under age 50) are less likely to get health benefits from drinking and are more likely to suffer adverse consequences compared to older individuals. In fact, excess alcohol consumption is the number one risk factor for premature death among American males ages 15 to 59.

“Alcohol consumption is a razor-sharp double-edged sword that cuts very deeply in opposite directions depending upon how it’s used. We have long known that excessive alcohol use can be highly detrimental to one’s health; our paper confirms this,” said James H. O’Keefe, M.D., lead author and cardiologist at Saint Luke’s Mid America Heart Institute. “Yet when used responsibly and in moderation, alcohol can also confer powerful long-term cardiovascular benefits. The key is avoiding escalation of intake into dangerously high levels. However, this is a slippery slope that many individuals cannot safely navigate. Even occasional binge drinking can be toxic to one’s health. So if you cannot keep your alcohol intake at or below the safe levels, you should not drink at all.”

“For more than two decades Saint Luke’s Mid America Heart Institute has led the way in cardiovascular research resulting in innovative procedures and discoveries into cardiovascular health which has driven new protocols, recommendations, and changes in patient care,” said David J. Cohen, M.D., M.Sc., director of
Cardiovascular Research at Saint Luke’s Hospital. “This study is another example of research that reveals new insight into the cardiovascular health risks and benefits of a lifestyle choice which impacts millions of Americans.”

About Saint Luke’s Mid America Heart Institute
Saint Luke’s Mid America Heart Institute, a member of Saint Luke’s Health System and a teaching affiliate of the University of Missouri-Kansas City, is one of the preeminent cardiovascular programs in the country. Its legacy of innovation began more than 25 years ago when it opened as the nation’s first heart hospital. Since then, the Heart Institute has earned a world-wide reputation for excellence in the treatment of heart disease, including interventional cardiology, cardiovascular surgery, imaging, heart failure, transplant, heart disease prevention, women’s heart disease, electrophysiology, outcomes research, and health economics. With more than 50 full-time board certified cardiovascular specialists on staff, the Heart Institute offers one of the largest heart failure/heart transplant programs in the country, has the largest experience with transcatheter aortic valve replacement in the Midwest, and is a global teaching site for the newest approaches to opening challenging blocked arteries using minimally invasive techniques.
Contact Information
Laurel Gifford
Saint Luke's Health System
+1 (816) 932-2709

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