Large study shows drinking alcohol is good for your cholesterol levels



The good and the bad

For reference, the optimal LDL level for adults is less than 100 mg/dL, and optimal HDL is 60 mg/dL or higher. Higher LDL levels can increase the risk of heart disease, stroke, peripheral artery disease, and other health problems, while higher HDL has a protective effect against cardiovascular disease. Though some of the changes reported in the study were small, the researchers note that they could be meaningful in some cases. For instance, an increase of 5 mg/dL in LDL is enough to raise the risk of a cardiovascular event by 2 percent to 3 percent.

The researchers ran three different models to adjust for a variety of factors, including basics like age, sex, body mass

index, as well as medical conditions like hypertension and diabetes, and lifestyle factors, such as exercise, dietary habits, and smoking. All the models showed the same associations. They also broke out the data by what kinds of alcohol people reported drinking—wine, beer, sake, other liquors and spirits. The results were the same across the categories.

The study isn't the first to find good news for drinkers' cholesterol levels, though it's one of the larger studies with longer follow-up time. And it has long been found that alcohol drinking seems to have some benefits for cardiovascular health. A recent review and meta-analysis by the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine found that moderate drinkers had lower relative risks of heart attacks and strokes. The analysis also found that drinkers had a lower risk of all-cause mortality (death by any cause). The study did, however, find increased risks of breast cancer. Another recent review found increased risk of colorectal, female breast, liver, oral cavity, pharynx, larynx, and esophageal cancers.

In all, the new cholesterol findings aren't an invitation for nondrinkers to start drinking or for heavy drinkers to keep hitting the bottle hard, the researchers caution. There are a lot of other risks to consider. For drinkers who aren't interested in quitting, the researchers recommend taking it easy. And those who do want to quit should keep a careful eye on their cholesterol levels.

In their words: "Public health recommendations should continue to emphasize moderation in alcohol consumption, but cholesterol levels should be carefully monitored after alcohol cessation to mitigate potential [cardiovascular disease] risks," the researchers conclude.

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