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The Case for moderate drinking

Alcohol in Moderation (AIM) was founded in 1991 as a not for profit independent organisation. One of its key functions is to monitor scientific publications on the association between moderate alcohol drinking and health for its journal and websites that have been dedicated to moderate drinking and associated policy and social issues for the past 16 years.

Clear parameters of moderate drinking

Accumulating scientific evidence (more than 100 studies from 25 countries) suggests that consumption of wine, beer and spirits does not pose a health risk to the vast majority of consumers who choose to drink in moderation.

AIM's recommendations also emphasise that adults should enjoy alcohol beverages in a sensible manner, preferably around mealtimes or in other responsible social settings that do not put themselves, or others at risk.

Moderation is the key to a healthy diet and lifestyle. It has not been possible to determine the exact inflection point in dose where a potentially beneficial, or harmless dose changes to a potentially harmful one, hence definitions of a drink and responsible drinking guidelines vary from country to country. Moderate drinking is generally medically defined, however, as up to 20g a day (one or two standard drinks) for women and 30g a day for men. Consumers should follow moderation guidelines such as those in the UK 1995 sensible daily drinking guidelines (2-3 units of 8g a day for women or 3-4 units of 8g for men) or the Dietary Guidelines for Americans which define moderation as up to two drinks (14g) a day for men and up to one drink a day for women.

Further, consumers should avoid alcohol during pregnancy, when driving, working with machinery or at heights, when on certain medications or if there is a personal or family history of certain illnesses.

Our message is that small amounts of alcohol on a regular basis (as little as one drink a day) confer the health benefits to a large segment of the adult population. 'Saving up' units for drinking on one or two occasions a week is not considered moderate drinking.

We endorse the WHO recommendations, where national guidelines do not exist of:

2 – women should not drink more than two drinks a day on average

3 – men should not drink more than three drinks a day on average

4 – Men or women should not to exceed four drinks on any one occasion

0 – Avoid alcohol in some situations, such as when driving, if pregnant or in certain work situations and abstain from drinking at least once a week.

Associated health benefits for certain segments of the population

The well documented beneficial effects of moderate alcohol intake on physical health are generally demonstrable among middle-aged or older adults, and are especially related to reductions in risk of many of the diseases of ageing (e.g., coronary heart disease, ischemic stroke, osteoporosis and bone density, type 2 diabetes, dementia). Often ignored are the less formally documented but still important beneficial effects of moderate alcohol intake on psychological and social well-being.

The beneficial effect of moderate drinking has been questioned by some in public health, hence the evidence base below.

Most recently for those over 70 (see reference report via: www.aim-digest.com/gateway/pages/oldage/articles/summary%20doc%20-%20ES.pdf by Dr Erik Skovenborg - alcohol - boon or bane for the elderly)

Valid component of a balanced lifestyle, irrespective of any health benefit

Although there are few demonstrable physical benefits associated with moderate alcohol use for pre menopausal women or men under 40, it is recognised that alcohol, consumed in the right context, in moderation with friends, at meal times, to celebrate, commiserate or unwind has both psychological and social benefit as a relaxant, stimulant and social lubricant. Alcohol in moderation has been enjoyed by many societies over the millennia and forms part of the Christian and Jewish religion.

Therefore, with or without the associated health benefits of moderate drinking for certain sectors of the population, drinking has a rightful place at the heart of many cultures and societies.

It should be noted, in the context of 'alcohol harm reduction' that the majority of consumers drink moderately most of the time. For example, in the UK it is estimate that 6% of women and 8% of men drink at hazardous levels (Department of Health). It is important that alcohol harm reduction policies do not penalise moderate drinkers, but are targeted at those causing harm to themselves or others through their drinking.

AIM also recognises that nearly half of world's adult population chooses not to drink for cultural, religious or health reasons. AIM does not advocate that non consumers should consume alcohol in order to improve their health, but that moderate drinking and the cultural, agrarian and social contribution of drinking that is interwoven into the fabric of many nations and cultures has a rightful place in society.

Evidence base

One of the first studies to suggest an inverse association between moderate alcohol consumption and coronary heart disease (CHD) was published more than 30 years ago by Professor Arthur Klatsky in 1974. Since then, more than 100 studies from 25 countries have confirmed and strengthened the association, with the protective effect applying predominantly to post menopausal women and men over 40.

Evidence from these studies suggests that beneficial changes in HDL cholesterol levels, clotting factors, insulin sensitivity, and markers of inflammation provide biological plausibility to the association. Moderation (defined as up to 20g a day for women and 30g a day for men) as recognised by most national government sensible drinking guidelines, is key.

Further epidemiological studies have assessed the importance of drinking patterns including frequency, quantity, and beverage choice. Most studies account for potential con-founders of the effect of moderate drinking - such as education, occupation, social status, physical activity, diet, and changes in alcohol consumption during lifetime.

The many epidemiological studies that have shown an inverse relation between alcohol and cardiovascular disease have come from a great variety of nations and cultures. Despite great diversity in the populations, study size, diet and lifestyle factors and length of follow-up the consistency and similarity of outcomes provide further support to the robustness of the findings. Inverse associations have been documented in France, Japan, Denmark, Germany, Finland, Korea, Great Britain Australia, China, Italy, Puerto Rico, the Netherlands, Sweden, Yugoslavia and the US for example.

Despite the strength and consistency across studies, some still argue that generalisation of the results may not be possible because of the selected nature of several of these study populations. However, general population surveys including the National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (NHANES) in the US and population based cohorts in the UK, China and Japan have also found benefit from moderate alcohol consumption.

More recent studies of alcohol and CHD have focused on subgroups defined by age or health status. Although alcohol in moderation will likely provide greater benefit for older populations where rates of CHD are highest, the etiology of CHD is such that moderate consumption in middle age also is beneficial. Several important risk factors for CHD, such as obesity and the prevalence of type 2 diabetes, both of which have been increasing in younger adults around the world, are consistently reported to be inversely associated with moderate alcohol consumption.

In addition studies show moderate alcohol consumption is inversely associated with second heart attack risk and indeed all cause mortality. Thus, in summary, the epidemiological evidence for an inverse association between moderate alcohol consumption and health amongst older populations is extensive and general to populations defined by age, ethnicity, geography, and prevalent health conditions.

A notable exception to the inverse association may be for breast cancer risk. A growing body of epidemiological studies show evidence for a positive association, even at moderate levels, (estimated lifetime increased risk of 6% per daily drink) for alcohol consumption and breast cancer risk. Lifestyle factors such as diet and adequate folate intake may weaken the positive association, but this is an area still under study.

It has been suggested that the inverse association between alcohol and all cause mortality may not be causal but because moderate drinkers may be better off, more likely to eat better, exercise more, and live a healthier life. Although most prospective studies of alcohol and cardio vascular risk are observational, trials have been conducted to study changes in markers of CHD such as HDL cholesterol, triglycerides, glycemic control, and clotting factors and support the conclusions of the observational studies. Long-term trials of alcohol consumption and subsequent cardiovascular events are difficult to conduct due to the long follow up required, cost and ethical considerations regarding the randomisation to alcohol or no alcohol consumption over many years, but are not impossible.

Parameters of misuse

Heavy or hazardous drinking (more than twice the moderation guidelines), inappropriate drinking (drinking to drunkenness), and binge drinking (more than five drinks in quick succession) have no health benefits and are associated with both acute and chronic harms to health, both short and long term.

Drinking at all in some circumstances is hazardous, such as when pregnant, on certain medications, when driving, suffering from some illnesses, working with machinery or at heights.

Alcohol misuse also includes the sale or marketing of alcohol to minors, the antisocial or violent behaviour that can be associated with excess drinking and drink drive.

This statement is supported by:

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Sources for statements:

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