

Alcohol and You

Drinking in moderation and keeping physically active is the formula for keeping heart disease at bay, Danish researchers report.

In fact, people who didn't drink and weren't physically active had a 30 percent to 49 percent higher risk of developing heart disease than people who drank, exercised or did both.

"This study is consistent with a number of prior studies which have shown that leisure-time physical activity and moderate alcohol consumption are associated with a lower risk of cardiovascular and all-cause mortality," said Dr. Gregg C. Fonarow, a professor of cardiology at the University of California, Los Angeles.

"However, it is very important to note that these findings, especially with regards to alcohol consumption, have never been confirmed in randomized clinical trials and need to be before any recommendations can be made regarding the use of alcohol for cardiovascular risk reduction," Fonarow cautioned.

In the study, Morten Gronbaek, director of research at the National Institute of Public Health at the University of Southern Denmark in Copenhagen and his colleagues collected data on 11,914 Danish men and women aged 20 and older who took part in the Copenhagen City Heart Study.

During an average of 20 years follow-up, 1,242 people died from heart disease and 5,901 died from other causes, according to the report in the Jan. 9 issue of the [*European Heart Journal*](#).

Among both men and women, being physically active was associated with a significantly lower risk for fatal heart disease and dying from any other cause compared with being physically inactive.

In addition, drinking was associated with a lower risk of fatal heart disease than not drinking. Moderate drinking reduced the risk of death among men and women. However, among heavy drinkers the risk of dying was similar to non-drinkers, the researchers found.

Among people who were physical active, those who didn't drink had a 30 percent to 31 percent higher risk of fatal heart disease compared with moderate drinkers.

However, among people who didn't drink but had a moderate or high level of physical activity, their risk of fatal heart disease was reduced up to 33 percent compared to those who didn't exercise or drink.

In fact, those who had at least one drink a week and were physically active had a 44 percent to 50 percent lower risk of dying from heart disease than those who were physically inactive and didn't drink.

Moreover, people who were physically active and had a drink a week had up to a 33 percent lower risk of dying from any cause, Gronbaek's group found.

"Physical activity and a moderate alcohol intake can lower the risk of fatal heart disease and all-cause mortality. But neither physical activity alone nor alcohol intake can completely reverse the increased risk associated with physical inactivity and alcohol abstention. Thus, both physical activity and alcohol intake are important to lower the risk of fatal heart disease and all-cause mortality," the researchers concluded.

One expert sees physical activity and moderate drinking as parts of a healthy lifestyle.

"The key messages of this study, based on a large cohort, are reaffirmations of what we already know, not revelations," said Dr. David Katz, director of the Prevention Research Center at Yale University School of Medicine. "Moderate alcohol intake reduces the risk of heart disease. Moderate physical activity does so, too, and even more powerfully. Combine the two, and the benefits are additive."

However, Katz stressed that practices that promote health are most powerful when combined into an overall pattern of healthful living.

"Combing regular physical activity with not just moderate alcohol intake, but a healthful dietary pattern, adequate sleep, effective management of stress, and avoidance of tobacco, and you can slash your risk of heart disease and premature death from any cause, dramatically," Katz said.