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A toast to your health

Moderation can have positive effect on the heart, diabetes, longevity



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By Victoria Shanta ReteIny, Environmental Nutrition

December 21, 2011

Alcohol may make you happy, but can it really keep you healthy? The good news is that moderate alcohol intake can fit into a healthy lifestyle and even offer some benefits — welcome tidings for the estimated 100 million American adults who drink alcohol responsibly.

Alcohol's potentially positive effects on health and quality of life have been on the public health radar screen for decades, dating to 1979, when one of the first research papers was published on the topic.

While there are positive health effects documented with moderate alcohol intake, drinking too much clearly wipes away any potential benefits. Consider alcohol a double-edged sword with the shiny side holding the promise of improved health and the lackluster side leading to health risks. Experts contend that garnering the health benefits (or not) of alcohol depends on the amount consumed,

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The lowest incidence of deaths due to diseases like heart disease and Type 2 diabetes occurs in moderate alcohol drinkers. In a literature review published in 2008 in the Journal of the American Dietetic Association, moderate drinking was found to consistently reduce mortality rates and disease risk among middle-aged (45-65 years) and older adults.

Cancer: No cause for celebrating alcohol. On the other side of the coin, studies show that even one drink a day can pose an increased risk for certain cancers, such as **breast cancer**. Experts caution women with a family history of breast cancer to monitor alcohol intake and abstain, if possible. And in a new meta-analysis published September 2011 in the Annals of Oncology, researchers identified a 21 percent increase in **colorectal cancer** risk associated with moderate alcohol consumption.

The **American Heart Association's** Diet and Lifestyle Recommendations, published in 2006, specifically suggests moderation for people who drink, with cautionary advice against taking up drinking just for the sake of health.

The AHA guidelines, as well as the 2010 Dietary Guidelines for Americans, recommend no more than one drink a day for women and two drinks a day for men due to men's larger size. Experts recommend that you drink alcohol with meals because food slows down the absorption rate of alcohol in your blood stream and eating will enable you to savor your drinks with food more mindfully.

What's a drink?

Apparently, Americans aren't in touch with what's in a drink. A 2000 national survey found that the majority of adults (54 percent) couldn't identify a standard serving of alcohol for distilled spirits, wine and beer. Here are the facts to set you straight:

One standard alcohol serving equals:

12-ounce beer 150 calories

5 ounces wine 100 calories

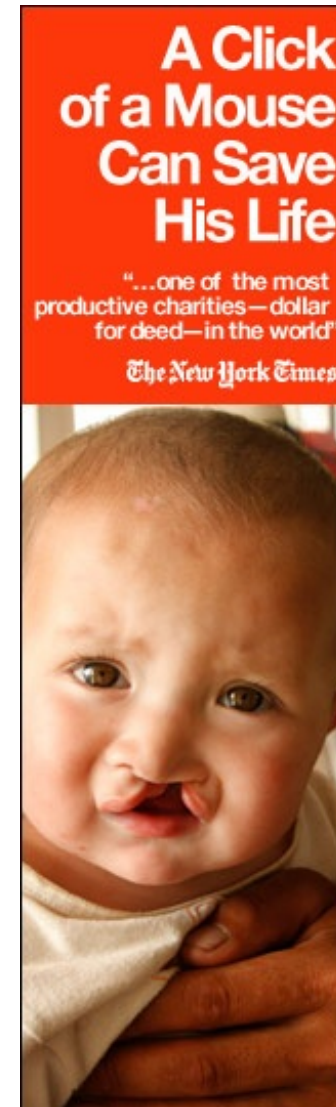
1.5 ounces 80-proof distilled spirits 100 calories

Source: USDA

Environmental Nutrition is a health and nutrition newsletter. For more information, visit

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