

February is Heart Health Month



It is hard to miss this fact this month. You are seeing all the boxes in the store telling you that their product will help your ticker keep ticking or bring down your cholesterol level just by eating them. As you reach for them make sure you know what you are eating. Are those crackers really whole grain or do they have a drop of whole grain flour in them and the rest is just white flour and chemicals. Be a good nutrition detective with all the seasonal cause marketing in full swing.

One can not leave cholesterol out of the mix with heart health. As cholesterol levels increase, most people are unaware that heart disease begins in childhood. We not only need to think about our own heart but we need to consider the whole

family. Remember, an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure!

Many of us wonder is Red wine, in moderation, as heart healthy as we think? The alcohol and certain substances in red wine called antioxidants may help prevent heart disease by increasing levels of "good" cholesterol and protecting against artery damage. This is only true up to a certain level and then the whole thing goes in reverse. That is one drink a day for women and two for men.

Research studies on the heart-health benefits of red wine have reported mixed results. Not what we wine lovers were hoping for. Some studies show that red wine seems to have even more heart-health benefits than other types of alcohol, while other studies show that red wine isn't any better than beer, white wine or liquor for heart health.

The studies supporting red wine suggest antioxidants in red wine called polyphenols help protect the lining of blood vessels in your heart. These antioxidants come in two main forms: flavonoids and nonflavonoids.

- **Flavonoids.** These antioxidants are found in a variety of foods, including oranges, grape juice, apples, onions, tea and cocoa. Other types of alcohol, such as white wine and beer, contain small amounts, too, but red wine has the highest levels of all.
- **Nonflavonoids.** These antioxidants found in red wine have recently been of particular interest because they appear to help prevent arteries from becoming clogged with fatty blockages. However, these studies mostly involved mice — not humans. Resveratrol is the nonflavonoid that's received the most attention from researchers.

Resveratrol in red wine

Resveratrol might be the golden nugget in red wine that helps prevent damage to blood vessels, reduces "bad" cholesterol and prevents blood clots.

Some research shows that resveratrol could be linked to a reduced risk of inflammation and blood clotting, both of which can lead to heart disease. More research is needed before it's known whether resveratrol was the cause for the reduced risk. The levels of consumption could be problematic.



Resveratrol in grapes and other foods

The resveratrol in red wine comes from the skin of grapes used to make wine. Because red wine is fermented with grape skins longer than is white wine, red wine contains more resveratrol. Simply eating grapes, or drinking grape juice, has been suggested as one way to get resveratrol without drinking alcohol. Some studies have suggested that red and purple grape juices have some of the same heart-healthy benefits of red wine.

Other foods that contain some resveratrol include peanuts, blueberries and cranberries. It's not yet known how beneficial eating grapes or other foods might be compared with drinking red wine when it comes to promoting heart health. The amount of resveratrol in food and red wine can vary widely.

How does alcohol help the heart?

Various studies have shown that moderate amounts of all types of alcohol benefit your heart, not just alcohol found in red wine. It's thought that alcohol:

- Raises high-density lipoprotein (HDL) cholesterol, the "good" cholesterol
- Reduces the formation of blood clots
- Helps prevent artery damage caused by high levels of low-density lipoprotein (LDL) cholesterol, the "bad" cholesterol

Drink in moderation — or not at all

Red wine's potential heart-health benefits look promising. Those who drink moderate amounts of alcohol, including red wine, seem to have a lower risk of heart disease. However, more research is needed before we know whether red wine is better for your heart than are other forms of alcohol, such as beer or spirits.

Drinking too much alcohol increases your risk of high blood pressure, high triglycerides, liver damage, obesity, certain types of cancer, accidents and other problems. In addition, even small amounts of alcohol can cause cardiomyopathy — weakened heart muscle — causing symptoms of heart failure in some people. If you have heart failure or a weak heart, you should avoid alcohol completely. If you take aspirin daily, you should avoid or limit alcohol, depending on your doctor's advice. You also shouldn't drink alcohol if you're pregnant. If you have questions about the benefits and risks of alcohol, talk to your doctor about specific recommendations for you.

Now for the bottom line! If you already drink red wine, do so in moderation. Moderate drinking is defined as an average of two drinks a day for men and one drink a day for women. A drink is defined as 12 ounces (355 milliliters, or mL) of beer, 5 ounces (148 mL) of wine or 1.5 ounces (44 mL) of 80-proof distilled spirits. The limit for men is higher because men generally weigh more and have more of an enzyme that metabolizes alcohol than women do. This will cover your chance that if the facts swing the right way you will have gained some benefits. So let's hope for some more conclusive research in the future.

