

Chow Line

News from the College of Food, Agricultural, and Environmental Sciences

With alcohol, stopping at one or two is best

During the holidays, I have to admit that I tend to drink more alcohol than usual. I think I could use a reality check. When you're out with friends or at a party, how much is enough?

The science is pretty clear on this one: The Dietary Guidelines for Americans recommends no more than one drink per day for women and two drinks per day for men.

Unfortunately, some people interpret that as an average, but it's not. If you consume alcohol only on Saturday night, it's not OK to imbibe seven drinks all at once — or 14 if you're a guy. It's not even recommended to partake in that second or third drink (again, depending on your gender). "Moderate drinking" has defined limits, and that's what they are. Note that pregnant women, anyone under age 21, and people who have certain medical conditions or who are taking certain medications are among those who should not drink alcohol at all.

It's also important to know what constitutes "one drink." It can be 12 fluid ounces of beer (5 percent alcohol), 8 ounces of malt liquor (8 percent alcohol), 5 ounces of wine (12 percent alcohol) or 1.5 ounces of hard liquor (40 percent alcohol, or 80 proof).

For many people, the one or two drink per day maximum might seem overly restrictive. But there are good reasons for the recommendations, and the CDC does a good job explaining them (cdc.gov/alcohol). Alcohol consumption above these limits is associated with a variety of short-term risks that most people are aware of, including car crashes, acts of violence and sexual risky behaviors. It's also linked with an increased risk of chronic conditions, such as high blood pressure and cancers including mouth, throat, esophagus, liver, colon and breast cancer. For some conditions,



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the risk increases even with very low levels of alcohol consumption — in fact, the CDC says, for breast cancer and liver disease, there is no safe level of alcohol consumption. And, although past research indicated moderate drinking might be good for the heart, more recent studies suggest maybe not.

The lower limit for women is not simply because women normally have a smaller body size than men. Differences in body chemistry and composition also play a part. Muscle is better at metabolizing alcohol (breaking it down and removing it from the body), and men typically have more muscle mass than women. So, given the same drink, women may experience the effects of alcohol more quickly and for a longer time than men, and it's more likely that drinking will cause long-term health problems in women.

If you think you can't have a good time at a party without three, four or more glasses of alcohol, then you're right, it's time for a reality check. Try enjoying a glass or two of sparkling water with a twist before pouring that glass of wine. At the very least, space out drinks to enjoy no more than one per hour, sipping water, iced tea or other non-alcoholic beverage in between. And focus more on the friends and family that you're gathering with instead of what's in your glass. You'll feel better, and without all of the empty calories that alcohol provides, you might look better, too.

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Editor: This column was reviewed by Carolyn Gunther, specialist in Community Nutrition for Ohio State University Extension.

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