

# Alcohol linked to cancer

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<http://www.cnn.com/2006/HEALTH/01/30/health.alcohol.reut/> Monday, January 30, 2006;

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MARK COLVIN: There's potentially confusing news today for drinkers, who've taken heart in recent years from various studies that suggested a glass or two of red wine might actually be good for you.

Now the World Health Organisation is warning of the dangers of alcohol, and a major new study in the medical journal *The Lancet* has linked alcohol consumption with cancer.

Helen Tzarimas reports.

HELEN TZARIMAS: The World Health Organisation says alcohol is underestimated as a cause of cancer in many parts of the world.

And it's not just liver cancer that's a concern. Excessive drinking has also been linked to cancer of the mouth, larynx, oesophagus, colon, and in women, breast cancer.

Alcohol is also suspected of a role in cancer of the pancreas and lung.

WHO figures show that in developing countries, alcohol killed more than one and a half million men, and 301,000 women in the year 2000.

During the same period in the developed world, alcohol caused the deaths of 185,000 men and 142,000 women, although it prevented 348,000 deaths from cardiovascular disease.

And that is the paradox of alcohol.

Not even the World Health Organisation advises people to give up alcohol completely, because of its protective benefits against cardiovascular disease. Instead, it recommends drinking alcohol in moderation.

Bruce Armstrong is the Professor of Public Health at Sydney University. He

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says protecting against the harm of alcohol is a balancing act.

**BRUCE ARMSTRONG:** What the NHMRC (National Health and Medical Research Council) tried to do now some 20 odd years ago, is to come up with an estimate of at what level of alcohol consumption do the harms start to exceed the benefits.

And they came up with a rule of thumb which is still commonly used and that is: for women, in excess of two standard drinks a day there will be net harm, and for men it's probably about four standard drinks or 40 grams of alcohol.

And it's often suggested that regardless of that advice if someone's drinking one to two drinks a day, which is well within the limit, particularly if you're a man, it's still best to have an alcohol-free day.

**HELEN TZARIMAS:** Professor Armstrong says it's still unclear exactly how alcohol causes cancer.

**BRUCE ARMSTRONG:** Firstly, there's the mouth, pharynx, larynx and oesophagus. And there, while we don't understand very well the role of alcohol, it probably has something to do with increasing the access that other carcinogens have to the cells.

It also increases risk of cancer of the liver.

The other, and perhaps most interesting, site at which alcohol causes cancer is in the female breast. What's happening there, it seems, is to either increase the production or the sensitivity of breast cells to oestrogen.

**HELEN TZARIMAS:** Alcohol is the leading cause of drug-related death in Australia. The most recent figures show that about 3.4 per cent of cancer deaths in Australia in 1998 were caused by alcohol.

Paul Dillon from the National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre believes many Australians underestimate the dangers of alcohol.

**PAUL DILLON:** There are so many other problems associated with alcohol ? the social problems, the psychological problems, so many different sorts of problems ? that we tend to push under the carpet because we become so obsessed with illicit drugs. Illicit drugs that are obviously a problem, but alcohol cannot be ignored.