

Large study shows moderate-to-heavy drinking increases blood pressure

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There have been a number of studies recently which show that moderate alcohol intake can be good for you, by raising the amount of "good" cholesterol. But a large new Japanese study suggests that middle-aged men who drink heavily could also see their blood pressure rise, regardless of whether their levels of "good" cholesterol goes up. Middle aged men were found more susceptible to the blood pressure-boosting effects of heavy drinking than younger men.

While there are signs that drinking can be good for the heart and boost good cholesterol levels, "this emphasizes that alcohol is not for everyone," said Kenneth Mukamal, M.D., an assistant professor of medicine at Harvard Medical School who is familiar with the study findings.

"This really fits well with the observation that the risk of stroke – which is more sensitive to blood pressure than heart attack – is not really substantially lower in moderate drinkers," Mukamal said. According to him, an increase in blood pressure might eliminate any benefit from higher levels of good cholesterol.

The Japanese study was launched to explore whether high-density lipoprotein (HDL) cholesterol – which is thought to protect the heart from disease – might play a role in how drinking affects blood pressure in men. Researchers looked at two groups of male workers, one 20 to 29 years old and the other 50 to 59 (in all, 21,301 subjects). All had periodic health examinations.

Young drinkers with low HDL cholesterol levels were no more likely to have high blood pressure than were nondrinkers with similar cholesterol levels. However, young men who drank heavily and had higher levels of HDL were more likely than nondrinkers were to have high blood pressure, suggesting that the "good" cholesterol did not stop the bad effects of drinking.

When looking at men of all ages, those with the lowest level of good cholesterol had the highest blood pressure in all three groups: nondrinkers, moderate drinkers and heavy drinkers. However, high levels of good cholesterol HDL did not do as much for the heavy

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drinkers.

Among older men, blood pressure was "significantly higher" in both light and heavy drinkers, regardless of their HDL cholesterol levels, according to the study's lead author Dr. Wakabayashi, who was not available for comment.

The findings appear in the September issue of the journal "Alcoholism: Clinical and Experimental Research."

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