

Why scientific support for alcohol's health benefits is fading

Level 3: Advanced

1 Warmer

a. These six countries consume the most fizzy drinks (i.e. Coke) per capita worldwide. Put them in order from 1 (most) to 6 (least).

Chile
Mexico
the USA
Belgium
Argentina
Uruguay

2 Key words

a. Fill the gaps in the sentences using these key words from the text.

abstain advocate booze clear-cut consensus
contentious flaw overwhelming predisposed purported
temperance untangle

1. If you _____ a policy or a way of doing something, you support it publicly.
2. _____ is the belief that it is wrong to drink alcohol.
3. _____ is an informal word for alcohol.
4. If you _____, you avoid doing something that is enjoyable but may not be healthy.
5. If an idea is _____, it causes disagreement between people.
6. A _____ is a mistake or fault in something.
7. If you _____ a complicated situation or problem, you solve it.
8. A person who is _____ to do something is likely to think, feel or behave in a particular way.
9. A _____ idea is said by some people to be real or true but is not proven to be real or true.
10. If evidence is _____, it is definite and easy to understand.
11. _____ is agreement among all the people involved.
12. If something is _____, it is much larger, stronger, more important, etc, than anything else in a situation.

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b. Use some of the key words from task A and complete the examples. You may have to change the form of the word.

1. The proposal for a new airport became a highly _____ issue during the debate.

2. Many members of the board _____ from voting due to conflict of interest.

3. The _____ benefits of the new diet were quickly proved wrong by a new study.

4. She is a strong _____ for environmental policies and speaks frequently at conferences.

5. He has shown great _____ in his style of leadership, promoting balanced decision-making.

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Research exposes flaws of older, often industry-funded studies and finds lowest mortality risk in lifelong abstainers

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- 1 Humans have been drawn to the idea that alcohol may have health benefits for almost as long as they have been drinking it. In ancient China, rice wine was widely used for medicinal purposes, while Hippocrates, the ancient Greek "Father of Medicine", advocated moderate amounts of alcohol for the mind, body and soul.
- 2 Later, proponents of the temperance movement, who urged nineteenth-century workers to quit booze, were met with resistance by those who thought beer was necessary for good health.
- 3 Surprisingly, the theory has since received plenty of support from modern science. When looking at how the amount you drink relates to your risk of cardiovascular disease and death, studies have come up with a puzzling but consistent "J-shaped curve", suggesting that drinking a small amount of alcohol is healthier than abstaining completely.
- 4 However, the idea has been contentious from the start and now, as research techniques become more sophisticated, a different picture is emerging; one that regular drinkers may not be happy to hear.
- 5 As recently as 2011, a meta-analysis concluded that the lowest risk of coronary heart disease could be achieved with one to two drinks a day. And, two years ago, the extensive global burden-of-disease study suggested alcohol may benefit people older than 40, contradicting their own 2018 finding that any amount of drink is bad.
- 6 Accompanying these studies, though, has been a steady chorus of scientists pointing to major methodological flaws. One core issue is that the risk of death among the non-drinking group is often inflated by significant numbers of "sick quitters" – people who have given up drinking for health reasons. Compared with these, it seems obvious that sensible types who drink in moderation are more likely to live longer.
- 7 Another problem is that many studies ask participants to self-report their alcohol intake, and their response is likely to be inaccurate and liable to change over time. A paper published earlier this year re-analysed data from previous studies and found that the lowest mortality risk was in those who had never drunk at all.
- 8 However, according to Tim Stockwell, the lead author of the latest study, this should not be taken as a conclusive answer; rather, an indication of how much more work there is to do. "At the end of the day, we don't take our findings literally; we don't think this is necessarily an accurate picture," he said. "It's more like putting up a mirror to how bad the research is."
- 9 A key reason why untangling the factors involved has proved so difficult is that alcohol affects everyone differently, and everyone drinks for different reasons. "It's tricky with alcohol because it has many different biological effects," Iona Millwood, a researcher at the University of Oxford, said. "People's drinking patterns are also determined by many other characteristics, which themselves are going to have effects on health."
- 10 To avoid these issues, Millwood's study used a novel approach that separated people who are genetically predisposed to drink more or less alcohol, rather than relying on their self-reported drinking habits. They found that for 61 different outcomes – including many cancers, liver disease, stroke and overall mortality – the conclusion was simple: the more you drink, the higher your risk. Other genetic analyses have found similar results.
- 11 It is important to note that alcohol's purported benefits only apply to cardiovascular disease and overall mortality (although Stockwell suspects the influence of the former drives the pattern in the latter). With many other diseases, the evidence is far more clear-cut. The overwhelming consensus on cancer, for example, is that any amount of alcohol increases your risk, as supported by a large analysis that compared light drinkers with lifetime abstainers and found significantly lower rates of mouth, intestinal and breast cancer in non-drinkers.

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- 12 So, if the tide of evidence is turning against alcohol's beneficial effects, why does the idea persist in the public's conscience? Mark Petticrew, a researcher at the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine, said he believed the efforts of the drinks industry explained a lot. "One reason why there's a public belief in these protective effects is that the industry has funded and promoted research as the tobacco industry did."
- 13 As evidence, Petticrew points to a 2021 analysis that looked at 60 different reviews of alcohol's impact on cardiovascular disease risk. It found that 14 of them were either directly funded by the alcohol industry or involved researchers with links to the alcohol industry. All 14 concluded that small amounts of drink could protect against cardiovascular disease.
- 14 In the end, much as people and the drinks companies might want to believe that a daily drink is the key to a long life, scientific support for the idea looks to be gradually fading.

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3 Comprehension check

a. Answer the questions using information from the article.

1. Where was rice wine used for medicinal purposes?
2. What does the "J-shaped curve" suggest?
3. What did the global burden of disease study conclude in 2018?
4. Why is it a problem that participants in studies self-report their alcohol intake?
5. What did the paper that re-analysed earlier studies find?
6. Why has untangling all the factors in this issue proved so difficult?
7. What was the "simple conclusion" of Iona Millwood's study?
8. What does research into cancer and alcohol show?
9. What did the 14 reviews funded by the drinks industry conclude?
10. How does this compare with the general scientific view?

4 Key language

a. Complete the phrases from the text using prepositions.

1. _____ moderation
2. _____ the end of the day
3. (an) effect _____ (health)
4. drawn _____ (an idea)
5. meet _____ (resistance)
6. _____ health reasons

b. Use some of the expressions from task A to complete the sentences.

1. Like alcohol, smoking has a negative _____ people's health.
2. Doing everything _____ rather than to excess is probably a good idea.
3. He was immediately _____ her energy and charisma.
4. The team's idea was _____ scepticism by the board of directors.

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5 Discussion

a. Discuss these statements.

- “Non-alcoholic drinks are better than alcoholic drinks.”
- “People who drink alcohol should pay more health insurance than people who abstain.”
- “Alcohol is a drug, and all drugs are bad.”

6 In your own words

a. Use an internet search engine to find information about alcohol consumption worldwide. Find out which countries have the highest levels of consumption and the highest mortality rates from diseases directly associated with alcohol consumption.

b. Report your findings to the class.