Why scientific support for alcohol's health benefits is fading

Level 2: Intermediate

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	beneficial	contradict	controversial	flaw
impact	intake	persist	predisposed	tricky

1. a verb meaning *to avoid doing something that may be enjoyable but also may not be healthy or safe*

    _____ (paragraph 2)

2. an adjective meaning *causing strong disagreement* _____ (paragraph 3)

3. a verb meaning say the opposite of what someone has said is true _____

    (paragraph 4)

4. a noun meaning *a mistake or fault in something* _____ (paragraph 5)

5. a noun meaning *the amount of something that you eat or drink* _____ (paragraph 6)

6. an adjective meaning *difficult to do or deal with* _____ (paragraph 7)

7. an adjective meaning *likely to think, feel or behave in a particular way* _____

    (paragraph 8)

8. an adjective meaning *having a good effect* _____ (paragraph 10)

9. a verb meaning *to continue* _____ (paragraph 10)

10. a noun meaning *the effect that something has* _____ (paragraph 11)

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. His new statement _____ what he said in a previous meeting.

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

3. There is a small _____ in the design, but it can easily be fixed.

4. We expect the new policies to have a big _____ on our revenue next year.

5. The decision to close the branch was _____ and sparked a lot of debate.

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27 July, 2024

1 In ancient China, rice wine was widely used for medicinal purposes, and Hippocrates, the ancient Greek "Father of Medicine", thought small amounts of alcohol were good for the mind, body and soul.

2 Surprisingly, the theory has some support from modern science. When looking at how the amount you drink relates to your risk of cardiovascular disease and death, some studies suggest that drinking a small amount of alcohol is healthier than abstaining completely.

3 However, this idea has been controversial from the start and now, as research techniques become more sophisticated, a different picture is emerging.

4 As recently as 2011, one study concluded that the lowest risk of coronary heart disease could be achieved with one to two drinks a day. And, two years ago, another study suggested alcohol may benefit people older than 40, contradicting their own 2018 finding that any amount of drink is bad.

5 At the same time, however, many scientists point to major methodological flaws. One issue is that the risk of death among the non-drinking group is often inflated by significant numbers of 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.

6 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.

7 A key reason why this research is 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."

8 To avoid these issues, Millwood's study used a new 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.

9 It is important to note that alcohol's supposed benefits only apply to cardiovascular disease and overall mortality. With many other diseases, the evidence is far clearer. With cancer, for example, the evidence is that any amount of alcohol increases your risk, and this is 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.

10 So if the 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."

11 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.

12 In the end, although some people and drinks companies might want to believe that a daily drink is the key to a long life, science is saying the opposite.

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3 Comprehension check

a. Are these statements True (T) or False (F) according to the article? Correct any that are false.

1. Hippocrates believed large amounts of wine were good for the mind, body and soul.

2. All scientists agree that drinking a small amount of alcohol is healthier than abstaining completely.

3. One 2018 study concluded that any amount of drink is bad for you.

4. Many scientists believe there are mistakes in the methodology that has been used.

5. Self-reporting is usually accurate.

6. The lowest mortality risk is among people who have never drunk alcohol at all.

7. In the case of many diseases, the more you drink, the higher the risk.

8. The tobacco industry has funded and promoted research into the effects of alcohol.

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4 Key language

a. Match the words in the left-hand column with those in the right to make expressions from the text.

1. mortality	a. techniques
2. medicinal	b. flaws
3. cardiovascular	c. risk
4. research	d. effect
5. beneficial	e. purposes
6. methodological	f. disease

b. Use some of the phrases from task A to complete the sentences. You may have to change the form of the words.

1. Some people argue that coffee has a _____ on people's health.

2. _____ have become more sophisticated over the last twenty years.

3. Smoking increases your _____ by damaging your lungs.

4. Many plants are used for _____ in different cultures.

5. Regular exercise can help you keep your heart healthy and prevent _____.

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5 Discussion

a. Discuss these statements.

- "Sugary drinks are delicious but they are also bad for you."
- "You should never eat or drink too much of anything."

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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.