

Why scientific support for alcohol's health benefits is fading

Level 1: Elementary / Pre-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.

conclude inaccurate intake sophisticated tricky

1. If something is _____, it is complicated and advanced.
2. To _____ means to decide that something is true after looking at all the evidence.
3. Your _____ is the amount of something that you eat or drink.
4. A(n) _____ result is not correct.
5. A(n) _____ problem is difficult to answer.

cardiovascular funding habit mortality stroke

6. A(n) _____ is something that you do regularly.
7. A(n) _____ is a medical condition where blood is blocked and cannot reach the brain.
8. _____ is the number of deaths within a particular group of people.
9. _____ diseases affect the heart.
10. _____ is the money that an organisation gives for a particular purpose.

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- 1 Surprisingly, some modern scientific studies suggest that drinking a small amount of alcohol is healthier than not drinking at all.
 - 2 However, now, as research techniques become more sophisticated, we see that might not be true.
 - 3 Although one study in 2011 concluded that one to two drinks a day gave people the lowest risk of coronary heart disease, another study in 2018 found that any amount of drink is bad.
 - 4 One problem is that many studies ask participants to self-report their alcohol intake, and their response is usually inaccurate. A study earlier this year analysed data from previous studies and found that the lowest risk of an early death was in people who had never drunk at all.
 - 5 A key reason why this research is so difficult is that alcohol affects everyone differently. "It's tricky with alcohol because it has many different biological effects," Iona Millwood, of the University of Oxford, said. "People drink for many reasons and these also have an effect on health."
 - 6 Millwood's study used a new method that separated people who drink more or less alcohol, and did not use 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.
 - 7 It is important to remember that the possible benefits of alcohol only apply to cardiovascular disease. With many other diseases, the evidence is far clearer. With cancer, for example, the evidence is that any amount of alcohol increases your risk. A large analysis that compared light drinkers with non-drinkers found much lower rates of cancer in non-drinkers.
 - 8 So if the evidence shows that alcohol is bad for you, why do so many people believe the opposite? Mark Petticrew, of the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine, said
- the efforts of the drinks industry explained a lot. "One reason why people believe that alcohol might protect them is because the industry has paid for research, just like the tobacco industry did."
- 9 Petticrew mentions a 2021 analysis of 60 different reviews of alcohol's effect on cardiovascular disease. It found that 14 of those reviews got their funding from the alcohol industry. All 14 concluded that small amounts of drink could protect against cardiovascular disease.
 - 10 So although some people, and the 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. Answer these questions about the text.

1. We are learning now that it might not be true that a small amount of alcohol is good for you. How do we know that?
2. What did the 2018 study find?
3. Why is self-reporting a problem?
4. Why is it alcohol with "tricky" according to the article?
5. What was Millwood's simple conclusion?
6. Which group has lower rates of cancer: light drinkers or non-drinkers?
7. Why do some people believe that alcohol might protect them?
8. What did 14 of the 60 reviews conclude?

4 Key language

a. Complete the phrases from the text using the prepositions in the box.

against of on to with

1. apply _____
2. effect _____
3. protect _____
4. risk _____
5. compare _____

b. Use two of the expressions to fill the gaps.

1. Drinking alcohol increases the _____ cardiovascular disease.
2. Some people still believe that alcohol may _____ certain diseases.

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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."

6 In your own words

a. Use an internet search engine to find information about foods and drinks that can protect people against cardiovascular diseases. Find at least five examples.

b. Report your findings to the class.