

HEALTHY MINDS
A WEEKLY COLUMN ALL ABOUT MENTAL WELLNESS
Elliott B. Sewell, MAE, LPCC, NCC

Drinking: Pros and Cons



I live in a Kentucky county where beer and alcohol sales are illegal. Nevertheless, the beer cans that litter the highway and the traffic to and from the Tennessee beer merchants just over the line tell a different story. Many residents do drink, some dangerously to excess, and some in a most moderate way. I am going to discuss the pros and cons of drinking, not from a religious point of view, for that is not my area of expertise, but from the point of view of how drinking can affect your health, your family's well-being, and your life-expectancy. I will point out that many Protestant sects frown upon the taking of alcoholic beverages, and many do not. Drinking is also prohibited in the Muslim faith, but not among Jews and Catholics, at least in moderation.

It is an established fact that up to a glass a day of wine or champagne can strengthen your heart and your memory. Alcoholic beverages have fewer calories than many non-alcoholic drinks, and they contain no fat. A noted Harvard professor of epidemiology and nutrition has found that having one drink a day helps women lose more weight than women who have nothing to drink, or who have more than one drink. These findings were based on a scientific study of 50,000 women. It is important to remember that if you do have that one drink, not to supplement it with high calorie snacks,

That one drink per day can slow down the onset of Alzheimer's disease, dementia, certain cancers, and heart attack; it increases blood flow to the brain and sharpens your wits (remember! only one drink!). It raises your "good" cholesterol (HDL) and lowers your "bad" cholesterol (LDL); it lowers blood pressure and can often increase the body's "awareness" of insulin, thus lowering the risk of type-two diabetes.

Before you reach for that bottle, let us talk about some of the downsides of drinking. Some people, especially women, worry that immoderate alcohol consumption will make them age faster. It does not. But hold on! Don't put on your party clothes and dancing shoes and head for that nearby honky-tonk until you consider several facts: at the bar you will be breathing lots of second-hand smoke, and maybe some of your own first-hand smoke, which will wrinkle your skin, deepen your voice, and increase your risk of cancer and heart disease; you will also tend to eat lots of greasy snack food. Furthermore, alcohol dehydrates you, and this takes its toll on your skin, where you can see it, and on those parts lurking under the skin, where you can't. This will definitely age you, unless of course you wreck on the road home.

For those of you who made it home in one piece, with all parts still attached and functioning, you should consider that binge drinking, or even as little as two drinks per day can reduce your bone mass by making those bones more porous (osteoporosis); after about four drinks in two hours a person can more easily lose his or her balance and break those more fragile bones.

Studies have shown that alcohol boosts estrogen levels. Does the increase in this female hormone make women more feminine? You decide! The European Cancer Conference reported that women who have between one and two drinks per day have a 10% higher risk of uterine and breast cancer than women who have less than one drink per day. For more than three drinks per day, the risk level increases to 30% higher.

Drinking also cuts down on your energy level and should be avoided when performing strenuous work or recreational activities. Just becoming dehydrated will slow down your get-up-and-go a great deal. Another study shows that the portrayal of alcohol consumption in the movies or on TV greatly enhances the chance that the viewer will take on the average of one and one-half drinks per hour more than a viewer watching a film or video without alcohol consumption. This is called modeling behavior, and is a powerful force.

A recent study from the University of Kentucky, printed in the current issue of The Journal of Studies on Alcohol and Drugs, demonstrated that people between the ages of 50 and 74 showed increased psychomotor impairment (body/mind coordination) than younger participants in the study. Furthermore, they were more likely not to notice how much more "messed up" they were, and perhaps even quickened their rate of decrease of mental functioning (cognitive decline).

National statistics say that one-third of people will become addicted to alcohol during their lifetime, and only one-quarter of those will ever get treated. Many people occasionally use alcohol as a form of self-medication, to escape from the difficulties of life. It doesn't work, as we so often hear on country radio; eventually, and usually after a hard fall, the bottle will let you down, and the climb back up can be tough.

Alcoholism can be a disease, it seems, because some people can easily become addicted, while others cannot. It is more than just family history, although people with a family history of alcoholism are three times more likely to become addicted themselves. However, studies of children of alcoholic parents who did not grow up in the home, but in a non-drinking household, still had a strong tendency towards alcoholism, which leads researchers to believe that there is an inherited (genetic) tendency towards alcoholism. It is also true that alcoholics become physically and psychologically addicted and should talk to their doctor or to a counselor.

If you don't drink, there is no reason to start drinking now, even if there are benefits from having one drink a day. Paying close attention to the quality of the food that you eat will help you to maintain your good health. That means avoiding sugar-rich products, eating lots of fresh and raw vegetables, avoiding snack-food, and lowering your consumption of red meat. The best drink you can have is spring water, and lots of it; avoid tap-water and filtered tap-water (with the exception of water from some very costly filtration devices) because of all of the many chemicals and pharmaceuticals that now pollute our water supply, and cannot be economically eliminated by our most conscientious water districts.

In conclusion, I raise my cup (of freshly-squeezed grapefruit juice – my drink of choice) and toast to your health. Eat, drink (both in moderation) and be merry.

TIP OF THE WEEK: The author runs a weekly drug and alcohol addiction cessation program at the Monroe County Jail, Tompkinsville KY, where he also does individual counseling for inmates, as needed.