



Alcohol and Heart Disease

Does alcohol affect the heart?

Alcohol can hurt the heart, but it may also help the heart. Any alcoholic drink causes a small but measurable change in heart cell function. Too much alcohol over time can enlarge the heart and weaken the heart muscle. When this happens, the heart muscle cannot pump blood as well. Eventually, this can lead to heart failure, which means that the heart muscle cannot pump enough blood to meet the body's needs. Heavy drinking of alcohol is also a common cause of irregular and fast heartbeats, called atrial fibrillation.

However, small amounts of alcohol may help the heart. Drinking alcohol may lower the risk of heart attacks and death from heart and blood vessel disease in some groups of people. This may be because alcohol lowers cholesterol and blood pressure. However, alcohol also increases the risk of falls, car crashes, and some kinds of stroke. Eating a healthy diet, exercising, and quitting smoking are better choices for heart health than drinking alcohol.

Moderate drinking is the key. Moderate drinking means 1 drink a day for women and no more than 2 drinks a day for men. A drink equals 12 ounces of regular beer, 5 ounces of wine, or 1 and 1/2 ounces of 80-proof distilled spirits, such as whiskey or vodka. Keep in mind that if you are taking certain medicines, you should not be drinking any alcohol because the combination could damage your liver or change the effects of your medicines. Ask your healthcare provider about this.

Daily use of more than a moderate amount of alcohol can make the heart bigger and may be a cause of heart failure. Binge drinking (drinking more than 5 drinks in a row) can also hurt the heart. It is not known how much alcohol it takes over how long to cause heart disease.