

# Your Body

By Anne Cassidy

## Women and Alcohol

# Menace or Medicine?

It's dangerous enough to require a warning label, yet many experts think it may help prevent heart disease. It contributes to one type of stroke and helps prevent another. It's been linked to an increased risk of breast cancer by some scientists, exonerated by others.

If you're bewildered about alcohol and its effects on your health, you're not alone. Add to the confusion a recent, well-publicized study of alcoholic and nonalcoholic men and women, which indicated that women are more affected by alcohol than men because they have less of a certain enzyme needed to metabolize alcohol. This latest report just highlights the real problem with research on alcohol today: How much is safe to drink, and for whom? What are the real dangers? Is there risk in moderate consumption? While there are no clear-cut answers, here's a look at some of the most important—if conflicting—studies.

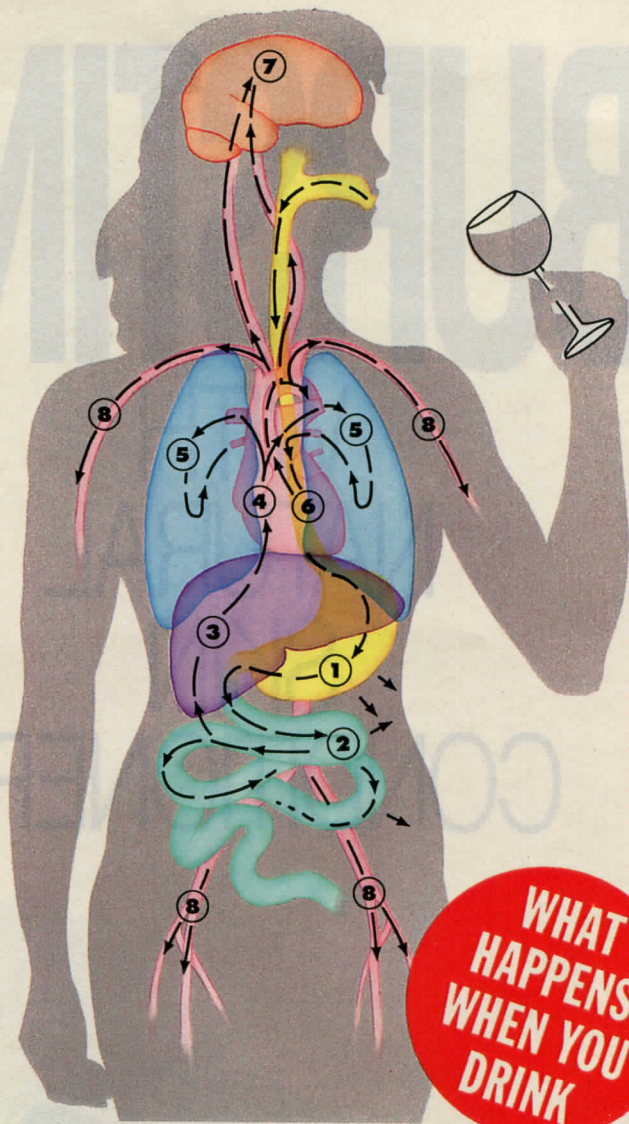
### HEART DISEASE AND STROKE

You may have heard reports lately that moderate drinking—one to two glasses of wine a day, for example—may help prevent heart disease and certain kinds of stroke in some people. In fact, many studies *have* shown that people who consume moderate amounts of alcohol have a lower incidence of heart disease than their nondrinking neighbors. But nobody really knows how alcohol works in this respect. One theory—that alcohol boosts levels of high-density lipoproteins (HDL), the so-called good cholesterol—has now been challenged by research showing that the *type* of HDL that alcohol raises may not promote heart health at all.

Studies on stroke have also sent mixed signals. For instance, researchers suspect that moderate amounts of liquor can have a protective effect because alcohol interferes with the blood cells' ability to stick to blood vessel walls, thus cutting the chances of stroke caused by blood clots. Yet the same amount of liquor may *raise* the chances of another, less common but often fatal, kind of stroke caused by cerebral bleeding. In addition, three drinks a day or more—or occasional bouts of acute intoxication—have been linked to high blood pressure (hypertension).

The bottom line? If high cholesterol is a problem for you, some experts feel that a couple of drinks a day may help raise HDL, improving the ratio of good to bad cholesterol. Of course, plenty of exercise and (Continued)

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WHAT HAPPENS WHEN YOU DRINK

Here's how a glass of wine circulates through your system: Alcohol moves down the throat and esophagus, reaching the stomach **1** only minutes after being swallowed. It stays there anywhere from 10 minutes to half an hour, depending on how much food is in there with it and how potent the alcohol is. (Food, especially high-fat food, slows alcohol's release from the stomach.) About 10% of the alcohol filters out of the stomach into surrounding tissues. The rest of it moves on to the small intestine, **2** where it is absorbed by the network of tiny blood vessels in the intestinal lining and enters the bloodstream; at this point, you begin to feel the alcohol's effects. Within as few as five minutes, the alcohol is carried to the liver **3** by circulating blood. Here it is broken down into water and carbon dioxide. From the liver the blood carries the alcohol to the heart **4** in seconds, and within seconds the heart pumps this blood to the lungs. **5** From the lungs the blood returns to the heart, **6** brain **7** and the rest of your system. **8** Because only a half-ounce of alcohol can be broken down each hour, the remaining alcohol continues to be circulated through your entire body.

Mary Ellen Senor



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## Your Body

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### Know How Much You're Really Drinking

Some drinks pack a bigger wallop than others—that's because different types of liquor hold different amounts of pure alcohol by volume. For instance, an ounce of beer has less pure alcohol than an ounce of hard liquor. That's why the size of a drink is important.

Dean Powell



**5%**

Most beer is only 5% alcohol ("lite" beer has slightly less). So an 8-ounce glass of beer . . .



**10%**

. . . has the same amount as a 4-ounce glass of wine, which is 10% alcohol . . .



**40%**

. . . or a 1-ounce shot of whiskey, vodka or brandy, which is 40% alcohol.



## WHAT'S YOUR LIMIT?

• If you're pregnant, don't drink. Stop when you plan to conceive or as soon as you find out you're pregnant. There's evidence to suggest that if you stop drinking at any time during your pregnancy, the effects of alcohol that your baby has already been exposed to will be lessened. • If you're nursing: Stick to a *maximum* of two drinks a day—and don't drink every day. Although some women believe that drinking beer will help their milk flow, you would be better off finding another way of relaxing. • If you smoke and you can't quit, at least stop drinking. By some estimates, the combination of the two may account for 75% of all cancers of the mouth, lips, tongue, throat and larynx. • If you aren't planning a pregnancy, currently have no health problems and are not at risk for alcohol dependence, most experts say it's safe to drink—but hold the line at a moderate intake. That means no more than two drinks a day (though not every day) and no binges of intoxication. Of course, if you don't drink now, don't start. But if you do imbibe moderately and wonder whether you should quit, bear in mind that, for most people, swearing off alcohol entirely is probably not realistic or necessary. Instead, weigh your risks carefully and use the latest research to help you make the wisest possible decision regarding your individual limit for social drinking.

smart eating habits are also beneficial. Few doctors will advise you to drink if you don't already do so; but if you do drink, says Elliott Howard, M.D., a New York City cardiologist, have no more than two drinks a day, five days a week. (Trace amounts of alcohol byproducts can linger in the heart, liver and other organs; your body needs a few days off each week to get rid of it.) If you have heart disease, high blood pressure or are at risk for stroke, discuss safe drinking levels with your doctor. If you drink and take aspirin regularly, you could precipitate a problem; since alcohol can raise blood pressure, and aspirin has an anticlotting effect, combining the two could make a cerebral stroke more likely.

### LIVER DISEASE

The good news here: Studies indicate that moderate drinkers needn't worry about developing most kinds of liver disease. But scientists now know that, for some people, downing a hefty three and a half drinks a day can cause fat to accumulate in the liver, the first stage of liver disease. Cirrhosis of the liver, the irreversible scarring of this organ, usually affects only heavy drinkers who have abused alcohol for years. Women

tend to develop liver problems before men do from drinking comparable amounts of liquor, says Charles Lieber, M.D., professor of medicine and pathology at the Mount Sinai School of Medicine in New York City. Rule of thumb: Limit yourself to two drinks a day—and don't drink every day.

### BREAST CANCER

Scientists continue to debate the link between alcohol and breast cancer.

One of the first major studies to indicate cause for concern was released in 1987; it found that women who have three drinks a week run a 50% greater risk of developing breast cancer than women who don't drink. The cancer risk rose with the amount consumed. However, those findings were quickly followed by research showing absolutely no link between breast cancer and alcohol.

Later still, Harvard University scientists reviewed all studies of alcohol and breast cancer and concluded that the evidence was "strongly supportive of an association." While nobody knows exactly how alcohol may trigger cancer, Saxon Graham, Ph.D., chairman of the department of social and preventive medicine at the School of Medicine at the State University of New York in Buffalo, says, "The evidence indicates that alcohol is more strongly related to breast cancer in premenopausal women, especially those in their 30's."

The experts' advice: If you have other risk factors for breast cancer—a close relative with the disease, early menstruation, late menopause, obesity, first pregnancy after age 30, or you are childless—drink very little alcohol. Says Dr. Graham: "I'd recommend having no more than a couple of drinks a day even if you *don't* have one of these risk factors." ■

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