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Benefits of drinking dismissed by study

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Hold on just a second before you reach for the pinot noir and raise a toast to your good health. A new study suggests the benefits of moderate drinking — including a purported drop in the risk of heart disease — may be illusory.

Researchers at the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found that moderate drinkers tend to be wealthier, better educated, more active and better nourished than non-drinkers and heavy drinkers, and it is these characteristics, rather than the nightly glass of wine, that explains their healthier hearts.

"It appears that moderate drinkers have many social and lifestyle characteristics that favour their survival over non-drinkers, and few of these differences are likely due to alcohol consumption itself," said Dr. Tim Naimi of the analytical methods branch of the CDC in Atlanta, Ga., and lead author of the research.

The new research, published in this week's edition of the *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, looked at 30 known risk factors for cardiovascular disease, including demographic factors such as age, social factors such as income, behavioural factors such as physical activity and diet, health conditions such as diabetes, body mass index and access to health services (notably, a lack of health insurance). Researchers then compared moderate drinkers to non-drinkers.

The research team, after sifting through the responses of more than 250,000 Americans, found that 27 of the 30 risk factors were significantly more prevalent among non-drinkers than moderate-drinkers. Only two risk factors — male gender and smoking — were significantly more prevalent among moderate drinkers.

Based on this data, Dr. Naimi said, one cannot conclude that drinking alcohol has any health benefits. He noted that the research showing that moderate drinkers are healthier is based on observational studies and could very well be explained by confounding factors, not alcohol consumption itself. "The science around moderate drinking is very murky," Dr. Naimi said.

Public-health authorities remain quite concerned, he said, with the impacts of alcohol consumption, and alcohol abuse in particular. All the news reports about the benefits of drinking may have resulted in the pendulum swinging too far and the public "getting sort of the wrong idea."

In the research paper, Dr. Naimi noted that about one-third of North American drinkers imbibe too much, and that excessive drinking is one of the leading causes of death — accounting for about 75,000 deaths annually in the United States and another 7,500 in Canada.

"If large numbers of non-drinkers begin drinking for their health, some initiates will undoubtedly drink excessively and/or suffer adverse effects of alcohol," he said. "This creates an ethical dilemma for the scientific and public-health communities."

In fact, medical and consumer groups have been very careful in the recommendations about alcohol, noting that all the research demonstrates associations, not a cause and effect between drinking and better health.

The Heart and Stroke Foundation of Canada, for example, says that people who do not drink alcohol should not take up the habit, but that people who do so in moderation — one drink daily for women and two for men — will likely not do themselves any harm.

With a report from Associated Press