In my last column, I talked about how to know if a person may have a problem with drinking. I want to carry on this discussion of alcohol by talking about its potential benefits. Many people have heard that drinking a glass of red wine each day is good for your health. Is this really true? Are there any health benefits from drinking alcohol? If so, how much alcohol is safe?

There have been many studies on the benefits of moderate drinking to lower the risk of heart disease. These benefits appear to be due to higher levels of HDL (good) cholesterol, decreased blood clotting, and a better response to insulin. The amount of alcohol that may lower the risk of heart disease is about one drink per day.

Moderate drinking may also lower the risk of stroke, vascular disease, and getting diabetes. The amount of alcohol which lowers stroke risk was about one drink a day for women and two drinks a day for men. Studies have also shown a lower risk for dementia from having between one and six drinks per week.

However, alcohol is not a health food. It is not as good for you as a nice fresh salad. Alcohol has risks, even with moderate intake. Moderate drinking may cause an increased risk for breast cancer in women, even with as little as one drink per day. Other cancers linked to moderate alcohol use (around two drinks per day) are mouth, throat, and esophageal cancer. Although moderate alcohol use might increase bone density, which is good, it is also linked to falls and fractures, particularly in older people.

Heavy drinking, of course, has many risks. Heavy drinking raises the risk of high blood pressure, heart rhythm problems, strokes from bleeding in the brain, and heart muscle weakness. Heavy drinking can also lead to liver failure and cirrhosis, pancreatitis, vitamin deficiencies, obesity, nervous system damage, memory loss, mental disorders, trauma from falls, and, of course, car accidents.

Alcohol may be helpful at one drinking level and harmful at a higher drinking level. As I mentioned in my previous column, some people should not drink alcohol at all, even in low amounts. These include people with a health problem made worse by alcohol, women who are pregnant or thinking of getting pregnant, alcoholics, those on medicines which conflict with alcohol, and those under age 21. If you are planning on driving or operating a chain saw, think two or three times about how alcohol can affect the safety of these activities.

So what is the bottom line? It is safe to say that low to moderate alcohol use may have some health benefits. But this only applies to people who can safely drink alcohol. The health benefits are the same, by the way, whether you drink beer, wine, or spirits.
These benefits are found at up to two drinks a day for men and one drink per day for women or people over 65. A worrisome level of drinking is three or more alcoholic drinks per day.

**About Partnership HealthPlan of California (PHC)**
PHC is a non-profit community based health care organization that contracts with the State to administer Medi-Cal benefits through local care providers, to ensure Medi-Cal recipients have access to comprehensive, cost-effective health care. First offering services in Solano County in 1994, PHC now provides quality health care to nearly 505,000 members in 14 Northern California counties - Del Norte, Humboldt, Lake, Lassen, Marin, Mendocino, Modoc, Napa, Shasta, Siskiyou, Solano, Sonoma, Trinity and Yolo.

*Dr. Jim Cotter is an Associate Medical Director at Partnership HealthPlan of California.*

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