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Drs. Oz and Roizen: Busting myths about alcohol

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Syndicated columns

By

Blame it on craft beers, inexpensive wine or the down economy -- North Americans are sipping more alcohol, more often. (Twenty-two percent of you say you drink too much, up from 17 percent a decade ago.) And while you all know that problem drinking is a serious health risk (any more than two drinks a day makes your RealAge older), the current hoopla about how wine is good for you may have led even the most abstemious sippers to believe there's no harm in a good belt or two.

So we're going to blow the cork on the most common myths about alcohol.

Myth No. 1: Seven to 14 drinks a week is a heart-healthy number, so there's no harm in having them all in a day or two! **Truth:** Saving up your weekly quota in order to guzzle four to seven drinks on each weekend day could raise your LDL cholesterol by 40 percent, and women who have seven to 14 drinks a week raise their risk for breast cancer between 30 percent and 60 percent. **Better idea:** If you're not at high risk for breast cancer or alcohol-abuse/dependency, having a half to one drink a day for women, and one to two a day for men keeps arteries supple and discourages impotence, wrinkles and even heart- and brain-threatening blood clots.

Myth No. 2: A little alcohol's OK when you're pregnant. **Truth:** Don't risk it. There's a lot of talk (and one study) saying that moderate sipping is harmless, but there are plenty of studies that show drinking in pregnancy increases risk of miscarriage, stillbirth, pre-term delivery, fetal alcohol spectrum disorders and even sudden infant death syndrome. **Better idea:** We agree with the CDC: "There is no known amount of alcohol that is safe to drink while pregnant."

Myth No. 3: Red wine is best for your ticker. **Truth:** Yes, red wine contains resveratrol -- but in amounts too small to get any cardiovascular benefits. (Red grapes have more!) A second or third glass won't get you to a beneficial level, either. **Better idea:** For real heart protection, take 900 milligrams of DHA omega-3 algal oil (from plants, not fish); walk 10,000 steps a day; keep good friends close; get your blood pressure to 115/75; learn to manage stress; and get plenty of sleep every night.

Myth No. 4: Introducing kids to alcohol at home is the safest option. **Truth:** Kids who drink at 15 or younger are six times more likely to develop alcohol problems than those who start at 21 or older. And almost half of those youngsters report that they get alcohol at home. **Better idea:** Drink responsibly (occasionally act as

the designated driver), and set a good example. Explain to kids just how dangerous drinking too much can be (lowers brain power, interferes with social development, impairs judgment and driving skills, and leads to obesity).

Myth No. 5: Drinking instead of eating helps you lose weight. Truth: Alcohol boosts cravings by messing with levels of the appetite-stimulating hormone ghrelin. You feel hungrier and less-than-healthy foods look extra-tempting. In fact, a drink is twice as likely to fuel overeating as watching TV or skimping on sleep. Better idea: Sip a half to one drink with your meal, then leave the table before you reach for seconds.

Myth No. 6: Alcohol's OK with most medicines. Truth: Everyone knows, or should know, not to mix alcohol with painkillers -- but any med can be risky. Alcohol alters how your body breaks down and absorbs everything from blood thinners to some heart and high blood pressure drugs. That means you may get a big, intense dose or not enough medication. Better idea: Skip alcohol when taking medications. Myth

No. 7: Drinking keeps colds at bay. Truth: Alcohol weakens your immune system by making virus-fighting white blood cells 75 percent less effective. This leaves you vulnerable to viral infections and more susceptible to catching colds and the flu. Better idea: Warm your bones in fall and winter with hot coffee, hot tea or hot cider spiced with immune-boosting cinnamon, nutmeg and cloves.

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