

A glass of wine a day may keep the doctor away

But if you don't drink, don't start because of health benefits

Linda Watts

Vancouver Courier

Wednesday, May 05, 2010

In his latest book, *Food Rules: An Eater's Manual*, author Michael Pollan outlines 64 simple, yet sensible, principles to follow for healthy eating and living. Given the countless number of confusing and inaccurate nutrition tomes on the market today, this publication is a breath of fresh air.

One of the dietary principles Pollan advocates in *Food Rules* is having a glass of wine with dinner. According to this professor of science journalism at University of California, Berkeley, and author of five other books on food and nutrition, there is considerable scientific proof of the health benefits of alcohol.

Public health authorities are extremely wary of recommending drinking because of the social and health consequences of alcoholism. I agree we need to be prudent with this advice but we can't ignore the fact that research is revealing moderate drinking may protect us against health hazards such as obesity, dementia and especially cardiovascular diseases.

We now know that people who drink alcoholic beverages moderately have a much lower risk of heart attacks and strokes than those who abstain or abuse it.

Studies that focus on alcohol consumption and health show that it doesn't matter what type of beverage contains the alcohol. It appears alcohol itself provides the majority of the cardio-protection by favourably influencing our blood cholesterol, which prevents plaque from clogging our arteries, and providing an anti-coagulant effect that reduces the likelihood of blood clots.

Wine, particularly red wine, may provide additional benefits because of polyphenolic compounds that are concentrated in grape skins. While both red and white wines contain phenolic compounds, they're more abundant in reds since these wines are made with the skins.

"So far over 200 polyphenolic compounds have been identified in red wine and many act as antioxidants," says Iain Philip, the senior wine instructor at the Art Institute of Vancouver and part-owner of Barbarian Wine Consulting.

"One compound getting most of the attention is resveratrol, which appears to have a positive effect on cardiovascular health and anti-cancer properties. But researchers aren't clear whether it's the individual components in wine that provide the health benefits or if it's how all the different compounds work together."

Philip questions whether studies looking at wine and health take into consideration other factors that improve our physical well-being. Wine drinkers are usually from a middle to upper social-economic class and have access to good medical care and healthier lifestyle choices. Drinking wine won't impart the same benefits if we aren't eating well, maintaining a healthy weight, avoiding smoking and exercising regularly.

"The way we consume wine may also influence its health benefits. We tend to drink wine slowly with meals and share it with friends and family," adds Philip.



CREDIT: Jason Lang photo

A glass of wine a day may keep the doctor away.

The key to deriving the positive health effects of wine and other alcoholic beverages is not over-imbibing. Excessive drinking increases our risk of coronary heart disease and certain cancers.

In Canada, moderate drinking is defined as one to two standard drinks daily with a maximum weekly total of nine and 14 drinks for women and men, respectively. A standard drink is 12 ounces of beer at five per cent alcohol by volume (abv), 1.5 ounces of spirits at 40 per cent abv, or five ounces of wine at 12 per cent abv. A wine that's higher than 12 per cent abv will provide more than a standard drink in each glass.

Our drinking pattern matters as much as the volume we consume. If we drink, we should have a little on a regular basis. We can't save up our weekly total for the weekend.

Even though there's ample research supporting the health benefits of alcohol in moderation, everyone can't drink. For a variety of reasons, some of us shouldn't go near the stuff.

If you don't drink alcohol now, don't start because of possible health benefits. But if you do like a beer or glass of wine, relax and enjoy yourself being mindful not to over-indulge.

And whatever you do, don't drink and drive.

Linda Watts is a registered dietitian. Email her questions at lwatts@vancourier.com.

© Vancouver Courier 2010

CLOSE WINDOW

Copyright © 2010 CanWest Interactive, a division of [CanWest MediaWorks Publications, Inc.](#). All rights reserved.
CanWest Interactive, a division of [CanWest MediaWorks Publications, Inc.](#). All rights reserved.