

Women, Alcohol and Breast Cancer **by the American Institute for Cancer Research**

For decades, alcohol has been linked to breast cancer risk. Until now, however, research had not identified just how big a risk alcohol actually poses for women. A recent review of many studies provides an answer. As daily consumption of alcohol rises, a woman's risk of breast cancer steadily increases.

A woman who consumes no alcohol at all has an 8.8 percent chance of developing breast cancer before she reaches 80. A woman who has one alcoholic drink faces a 9.4 percent chance of doing so. Two drinks a day raises the odds to 10.1 percent and four drinks a day raise her chances to 11.6%.

Other Factors Still Influence Risk

These numbers are deceptive because alcohol does not pose equal risks for all women. The quality of a woman's diet makes a difference. For example, women who don't consume enough folate – a B vitamin found in dark, leafy greens, orange juice and other plant foods that is essential for repair of damaged DNA are at a greater risk. This makes sense. One of the ways alcohol is believed to increase cancer risk is by damaging DNA. Genetic changes can also affect a woman's susceptibility to damage from alcohol. For instance, some women may have an abnormal gene and not produce a specific enzyme that detoxifies potential carcinogens, like alcohol, before they can alter DNA. These women experience nearly double the risk of post-menopausal breast cancer. Drinking regularly can increase their risk significantly.

Drink, Eat and Exercise Wisely

Because women may not know their genetic makeup, it's best to exercise caution. The American Institute for Cancer Research (AICR) advises women to drink less than five ounces of wine, 12 ounces of beer or 1.5 ounces of 80 proof liquor a day, if they drink at all. Men are advised to drink less than double those amounts or not at all.

Women should note that alcohol might have a greater impact when consumed at younger ages. Between puberty and a woman's first pregnancy, breast cells are more susceptible to damage from cancer-causing agents.

Another way to lower a woman's risk of breast cancer is to eat more vegetables, fruits, whole grains and beans. Diets low in these foods, according to AICR, are responsible for at least as many breast cancers as alcohol.

Maintaining a healthy weight and exercise may also help prevent breast cancer. Overweight after menopause raises risk as much as having three to four drinks a day. Obesity represents an even greater threat. As little as two hours a week of brisk walking can actually reduce a woman's chance of developing breast cancer more than a moderate consumption of alcohol raises it.

*You can find more information on how to prevent breast cancer in the brochure **Reducing Your Risk of Breast Cancer**. Call AICR at 800-843-8114, ext. 110 to request your free copy.*