

# Health Matters: Knowing Your Limits with Alcohol

*By Dr. Mario Espindola, Family Medicine*

We live in a beautiful valley where many people's livelihoods are tied to viticulture and the making of wine. We also entertain tourists from miles away who come to sample the wonderful wine of Mendocino County. In a community like ours where the economic base is so closely tied to an alcoholic beverage, it is extra important to know where the line is between healthy, social drinking and unhealthy drinking.

Wine and other alcoholic drinks are not inherently bad. In fact, some scientific studies show that in small doses, red wine may provide some health benefits; specifically, that antioxidants such as flavonoids or a substance called resveratrol may protect the lining of blood vessels in your heart.

Mayo Clinic says the resveratrol found in red wine might help prevent damage to blood vessels, reduce low-density lipoprotein (LDL) cholesterol—the "bad" cholesterol—and prevent blood clots, but notes that more research is needed.

For people who drink in moderation, the negative side effects of alcohol are usually minimal. The National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA) defines low-risk drinking for women as no more than 3 drinks on any single day and no more than 7 drinks per week. For men, it is defined as no more than 4 drinks on any single day and no more than 14 drinks per week. A standard drink can be a 12-ounce beer which is usually 5 percent alcohol, a 5-ounce glass of wine which is usually 12 percent alcohol, or a 1.5-ounce drink of distilled spirits which is usually about 40 percent alcohol.

When people drink more than NIAAA's low-risk limits, health problems arise. Even if you stay within the limits, you increase your carbohydrate and calorie intake every time you drink. You may also be increasing your blood pressure and your triglycerides (a type of fat). So if you struggle to maintain a healthy weight or are on blood pressure medication, reducing your alcohol intake is a good idea.

It is also important to remember that certain people should avoid alcohol completely, including the following:

- Those who plan to drive a vehicle or operate machinery,
- Those who take medications that interact with alcohol,
- Those who have a medical condition that alcohol can aggravate, or
- Those who are pregnant or trying to become pregnant.

Be aware that alcohol can be extra dangerous when mixed with other drugs, whether prescription or non-prescription. If you are taking opioid painkillers, drinking alcohol can lead to an accidental overdose or even death.

If children are present in the home, parents and other adults can inadvertently share attitudes and behaviors about alcohol that can be dangerous for young people. Adults should drink responsibly, especially in front of children, and parents should be explicit with their teens that drinking before the age of 21 is both illegal and unhealthy. This message is easier for teens to accept when parents do not abuse alcohol.

If you drink more than the low-risk limits for an extended period of time, you put yourself at risk for several serious health conditions, causing damage to your heart, stomach, liver and pancreas, and increasing your risk for several types of cancer.

Potential heart problems include cardiomyopathy, the weakening of your heart muscle; arrhythmias, an irregular heartbeat; stroke and/or high blood pressure. Potential liver problems include steatosis (fatty liver disease), alcoholic hepatitis, fibrosis, and/or cirrhosis. High alcohol consumption can also lead to pancreatitis, which is very painful and can cause serious digestion problems.

If you need help reducing your alcohol intake, talk to your doctor or primary care provider. Many excellent treatments exist, including FDA-approved medications to help you stop drinking. Typically, we start with behavioral interventions. For those who need it, we have a wonderful community resource to help with detoxification—the Ukiah Recovery Center. Wherever you are in this journey, we can help. All you have to do is take the first step—call your medical provider for an appointment today.

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