

All about ALCOHOL



Is a little alcohol really good for us – or is none better? It seems there's a contradictory study published every other month. How are we to make an informed decision about enjoying booze – especially as we head into the "silly" season? **Samantha Page** finds out

Wine and other forms of alcohol have a sparkling past and present. The oldest (intentionally) fermented beverage that has ever been discovered is a 9000-year-old rice, honey and fruit wine. Whether you have a proclivity for a robust red, a flirtatious cocktail or a crisp, ice-cold

beer, these days – depending on your outlook and lifestyle – alcohol is seen as an elixir, a nightcap, a status symbol, a coping mechanism and/or a social "lubricant".

The intoxicating power of ethanol (the type of alcohol produced by fermenting grains, fruit or other sources of sugar) is in its ability to make you feel good

because it releases serotonin, dopamine and endorphins in the brain that make the drinker happy and calm; in fact, the initial effects of alcohol entering the body can be felt within 10 minutes. The debate about the risks and benefits, though, is as lively as the sauvignon blanc being passed around at book club. How much is enough, or too much – and how is the body affected?



TONIC VS POISON

As the old adage goes: it's the dose that makes the poison. According to the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, alcohol is both a tonic and a poison, and the difference lies mainly in the quantity consumed. Pick n Pay dietitian Juliet Fearnhead explains that while some studies have found that a modest wine intake (half to one drink per day for women, one to two per day for men) might decrease the risk of heart disease, anything more may be harmful to health. Risks include increased blood pressure, elevated triglycerides

CUTTING BACK ON ALCOHOL
Whether it's to help manage your blood pressure or stay at a healthy body weight, here are some ways to reduce your alcohol intake:
→ Especially during the party season, try not to drink every day.
→ Space your drinks at least one hour apart.
→ Drink sparkling water with lemon or lime in between alcoholic drinks to satisfy thirst.
→ Try a shandy with half sugar-free lemonade and half beer.
→ Mix soda water with wine for a spritzer, and add lots of ice.

LOW-RISK DRINKING GUIDELINES

If you don't drink alcohol you certainly shouldn't start purely for health reasons but if you do enjoy a regular tippie, dietitian Juliet Fearnhead recommends these consumption guidelines:

MEN	WOMEN
No more than 14 drinks a week	No more than 7 drinks a week

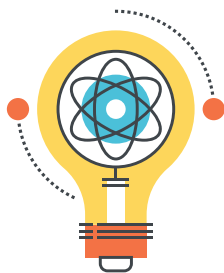
WHAT QUALIFIES AS A "DRINK"?

Type of drink	Quantity of alcohol
1 regular bottle or can of beer (approximately 340ml)	4-5%
1 small glass of wine (approximately 150ml)	12%
1 sherry glass of sherry, port or vermouth (approximately 85ml)	16-18%
1-2 tots of spirits such as rum, gin or vodka (approximately 45ml)	40+%

HEALTH

(a type of fat), liver damage and several types of cancer. Something else to consider is that alcoholic beverages are a source of energy, which may cause weight gain and increase the risk of other health conditions.

Professor Charles Parry of the South African Medical Research Council adds: "South Africa has among the highest levels of heavy drinking in the world, and the pattern of weekend binge drinking, in particular, is problematic. Besides the risks to the body, the social effects are many and the economic costs far outweigh what the country receives in tax revenue."



NEW RESEARCH

Professor Parry, co-author of a study published in *The Lancet* medical journal in 2018, says no amount of drinking is good for you. Examining more than 1 300 studies, the authors were able to conclude that alcohol was the seventh leading risk factor for premature death around the world in 2016, contributing to 2.8 million deaths globally. Professor Parry

adds that while there are modest cardiovascular benefits associated with moderate drinking, the benefits are largely overshadowed by the numerous ways alcohol can threaten health.

Before you get too upset at the prospect of having to give up pinot grigio forever, consider the tempering voice of David L. Katz (founding director of Yale University's Yale-Griffin Prevention Research Center, and founder and president of the True Health Initiative), as reported by Forbes.com in response to the above findings: "This paper simply examines alcohol intake at the population

level; it is blind to the behaviour of individuals. The data do show lowering heart disease risk with moderate alcohol intake, so there is still the possibility of both lowering health risks with alcohol and getting pleasure from it."

Ultimately, it's up to us as individuals to take responsibility for our health and decide if the pros outweigh the cons. It's not a comfortable experience to accept that something that we enjoy so much, that relaxes

us so reliably, may also be harming our health but when we consider that alcohol is the most abused substance in South Africa it becomes clear that, unless we are vigilant and willing to acknowledge the very real dangers, it can be all too easy for this mood-altering substance to slip from "calming" to "compulsive".

WHAT IS SA DRINKING?

56%	BEER
18%	WINE
18%	SPIRITS
8%	OTHER

NEED HELP?

Alcoholics Anonymous: 0861 435 722
 South African Depression and Anxiety Group: 0800 456 789
 We Do Recover: 081 444 7000

WHATCHA DRINKING?

Take our test and find out how much you really know...

1. WHAT IS THE PRIMARY CAUSE OF A HANGOVER?

- a Being unfit
- b Ethanol
- c A headache
- b Ethanol (also called ethyl alcohol, grain alcohol or alcohol) is a toxic chemical that causes dehydration. It's also a diuretic, which results in more frequent urination.

2. TOO MUCH ALCOHOL CAN CAUSE ANXIETY

- a True
- b False

- a The Anxiety and Depression Association of America notes that 20% of people dealing with social anxiety disorder suffer from some form of alcohol abuse or dependence.

3. ALCOHOLISM IS HEREDITARY

- a True
- b False
- a Genetics play an important role in determining an individual's preference for alcohol, but it's a complex equation that is influenced by several genes and environmental factors.

4. WHAT ARE SOME OF THE WARNING SIGNS OF ALCOHOL ABUSE?

- a Drinking alone or in secrecy
- b Blackouts or temporary memory loss
- c Not feeling able to stop, even if you want to
- all No matter how minor the problem may seem, if alcohol is being consumed in excess, altering your lifestyle and affecting relationships, it's important that you

reach out and get help (see helplines to call above).

5. ONE GLASS OF WHITE WINE (150ML) CONTAINS:

- a 100kJ
- b 300kJ
- c 500kJ
- c While this measure is for a regular glass of wine, mixed drinks that include juice, tonic or flavoured syrups will further increase the kilojoule count, ramping up your risk of gaining weight over time.

Join the Mindful Drinking movement!

The times they are a-changin'. There's an emerging global trend of choosing low- and non-alcoholic drinks for health and social reasons, and it's now gaining serious momentum in South Africa. Mindful Drinking SA's mission is to make it socially acceptable (and even, dare we say, cool) for young and old to choose non-alcoholic drinks in any given situation. Visit Mindfuldrinking.co.za to find out more.