



WOWSER? SOBER UP

I'm reluctant to write this column. That's because I know by the end of it I'm going to be, in many minds, the fun police. A wowser. You're not going to like me much. I'll be the messenger you'll want to shoot.

SO BEFORE I START ON THE subject of alcohol, you should know that I like a glass of wine. It's my drug of choice, truth be told, and it pains me as much as it does you to be the bearer of bad news. But in the past year or so I've cut my wine habit right down, because I couldn't ignore the evidence coming across my desk with increasing regularity, showing that alcohol is really not good for us, no matter how much we might wish it to be.

So, here goes ...

Perhaps you won't be surprised that according to Alcohol Healthwatch data, alcohol is ranked as the third leading contributor (after high blood pressure and smoking) to death and disability worldwide, and is the single leading risk factor for death and disability in young people. It is a causal factor in 60 diseases and injuries and a contributing factor in 200 more. Those diseases include cardiovascular disease, diabetes, alcoholic liver disease, respiratory diseases and pancreatitis.

What may be more surprising is alcohol's link with cancer. For the past 27 years, alcohol has been recognised as a Group 1 carcinogen. That's the same carcinogen-rating as tobacco and asbestos – meaning there is strong evidence that alcohol causes cancer; specifically cancers of the mouth, pharynx, larynx, oesophagus, liver, colon, rectum and breast.

Even more startling: if we were to take the same approach to alcohol as we do to other carcinogens, we'd hardly drink at all. Adopting the European Food Standards Authority guidelines on exposure to carcinogens in food and drinks, experts argue that exposure should be no more than one thousandth the toxic dose.

For alcohol that works out to be no more than about 50 milligrams of alcohol a day; equivalent to 20g or two drinks a year!

At this point you may wonder: what about alcohol's purported benefits? Haven't we heard that red wine is good for our hearts? These

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Illustration: Vasanti Unika

benefits, say experts, have been overblown, and any benefits that alcohol may have for the heart are outweighed by the harms, especially if our pattern of drinking includes even occasional episodes of heavy drinking (which may not mean what you think it does: six standard drinks a day is considered heavy).

If that doesn't faze you, let me appeal to vanity: alcohol makes us fat. It's not, as some people think, the sugar in alcoholic drinks that piles on the pounds. It's the alcohol. That's because it's energy-dense. One gram of alcohol provides 29kJ, second only to fat at 37kJ. All it takes is four 150ml glasses of wine, or four 330ml bottles of cider or beer, and we've drunk the equivalent of an extra meal.

So knowing this, we can see how the very best idea would be not to drink at all. Cancer experts, certainly, say there's 'no safe level of consumption'. But if that's unpalatable, what's best for those of us who do still want to enjoy a drink?

Low-risk drinking guidelines say we can reduce our long-term health risks by drinking no more than 2 standard drinks a day and no more than 10 standard drinks a week for women, or 3 standard drinks a day for men with no more than 15 standard drinks a week. On top of that we should ideally have at least two alcohol-free days every week.

Bear in mind a standard drink is pretty small – the equivalent of 100ml of wine, 30ml of spirits or 280ml of beer. I have lovely big wine glasses into which I routinely pour myself one and a half standard drinks – I know, because I measured.

Try this yourself – it may prove sobering. 🍇



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