

Question : How Much Can I Drink?

Answer : At my annual exam with my doctor today, I asked how much red wine was OK to drink daily considering the latest research on alcohol and breast cancer. I read that women should drink no more than 5 ounces per day. I am 61 and healthy. -CS, Palo Alto Dear CS, We invite you to read our hot topics article on alcohol and breast cancer. The answer to your question is complex. The definition of “what is a drink” is not standardized among published studies, although the FDA nutritional guidelines define a glass of wine, whether white or red as 5 ounces and 12% alcohol (There are not many California wines that fulfill this 12% criteria and most actually exceed this percentage.). The nutritional guidelines state that one drink/day for women (This assumes that a woman consumer is of average size, 5ft. 4 inches and 125 lbs.) and up to 2 drinks/day for men may be protective against the most common cause of death: heart disease. It also seems to decrease all-cause mortality. Although the data is provocative, it is not definitive. Nonetheless, let’s proceed with an example: A 5-ounce pour of 2005 Martinelli JackAss Zinfandel at 17.5% alcohol. That’s 20.8 grams of alcohol compared to the FDA example at 13.6 grams. Not only does this reflect the failure to update information based on “hotter”, higher alcohol wines, but the difficulty of standardizing information. Published studies linking alcohol to postmenopausal breast cancer are epidemiologic and observational and therefore subject to biases. As an example, similar study designs concluded that menopausal estrogen therapy decreased the risk of coronary heart disease. Subsequent prospective randomized studies showed that menopausal estrogen therapy actually increased the risk of heart attacks, strokes, and blood clots in postmenopausal women. Unfortunately, there are no prospective, randomized human trials that address alcohol as a risk factor for breast cancer and this question remains unanswered. It is important to note that approximately 30% of women may encounter cardiovascular events in their lives while only 11% may encounter breast cancer. Data suggests, however, that women disproportionately express their concerns about this cancer risk by up to 8 fold over vascular events. You must, remember that these are generalized statements and cannot replace the individual advice that only your personal physician can provide. We hope this gives you something to ponder and maybe discuss over your next glass of wine...