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Second Opinion: A Hearty Toast

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Finally some good news for white wine lovers: Drinking can benefit your lungs! I rush out to a friend's birthday party and fill my glass with an Italian white. Drinking one to three glasses a day has a "positive association with pulmonary function," says the study. It's equivalent to knocking two years off your age lung-wise, I tell my hosts. Happy birthday! Hallelujah! Now we can all breathe easier.

No doctor is going to start prescribing Trebbiano d'Abruzzo to patients with emphysema on the basis of this study, which was reported last week at the meeting of the American Thoracic Society in Atlanta. But if a healthy patient "tells me he drinks one or two glasses a day, I would not recommend that he stop it," says the study's cautious author, Holger J. Schunemann of the State University of New York at Buffalo.

"We have no data that if you start drinking white wine now, something will happen to your lungs," he says. "But, yes. People who drink white wine have better lung function."

Obviously, this is not a green light for people to hit the sauce. Encouraging people to drink is hazardous. The risks of addiction, injury, violence and disease are well-known. But "moderate alcohol intake" is the phrase where science and common sense intersect. A full-bodied chardonnay now and then is probably not harmful and may even have some benefit.

Wine has always had a certain medical cachet. A number of studies show that drinking wine, especially red wine, may lower cholesterol levels and reduce the risk of heart disease. Drinking wine may also help the aging brain. Look at elderly Italians: People over 65 who drank wine were less likely to show signs of dementia than those who abstained, according to a recent study. And the Danes! Men and women who drank eight to 21 glasses of wine a week had a greater reduction in their risk of dying of all causes over a study period of about 10 years than those who only drank seven glasses. Of course, those who consumed more than 35 drinks a week had a *higher* death rate than non-drinkers.

With all these benefits stacking up for moderate drinking, wine is joining other dietary delights that have been elevated to the status of "nutriceuticals" -- foods with drug-like

properties. After this latest news, your next glass of Kendall-Jackson may well be labeled a "vino-ceutical."

This is the first time drinking wine has been directly linked to lung function. Doctors know that lung function is a good predictor of heart disease and premature death. Obstructive lung disease alone is the fourth leading cause of death. If your lungs are impaired, you have a greater risk of dying before your time.

Also striking about this study is that white wine proved superior to red. The bulk of research has been done on red wine, points out Schunemann, and red is usually hailed as more protective of the heart. Now it's white wine's turn.

Scientists ascribe wine's benefits to the presence of antioxidant compounds, which are also found in chocolate as well as fruit and vegetables. In the lungs, these compounds would theoretically counteract menacing molecules that destroy tissue and cause the airways to narrow. While both red and white wine showed some effect on the lungs in this study, white was the clear winner.

You begin to get the gourmet picture of health: Start the meal with a breath-enhancing white wine to wash down some omega-3 fatty fish; move to a cholesterol-lowering merlot for the beefless Tofu Wellington. . . .

I'm getting ahead of myself. "We need much more data," cautions Schunemann. But this is the fantasy of finding the elixir to make you live well and long. "You can't prolong your life, at least not on our data," says Schunemann.

The study has limits. Schunemann and his colleagues drew their data from a general population sample. Randomly selected men and women filled out a questionnaire and were interviewed about their lifestyle patterns. They also underwent two tests to measure the strength of their lungs.

Results were significant. Not just recent consumption but a lifetime habit of white wine appeared to help lungs. Statistically speaking, drinking white wine counteracts two years' worth of aging on the lungs, says Schunemann.

But a population study is not the gold standard of research; that would be a double-blind, randomized, controlled trial that would test the therapeutic value of wine against a placebo. Such a trial probably couldn't be done. Surely a participant would be able to detect a pinot grigio placebo?

This study did not focus on wine. It looked at all forms of alcohol use. And even though the results were adjusted for smoking, age, height, weight, race, gender and socioeconomic status, some other lifestyle factors may be at work to explain white wine's supremacy.

What's more, all the participants were from the Buffalo area -- not exactly known as a Chablis-and-brie kind of place. Indeed, the most popular drink in the study was beer.

Still, the lung-wine connection is welcome news for chardonnay lovers who have been looking for solace in all the wrong headlines.