

The Lungs Favor White Wine

Massive Antioxidants in Beverage Have Positive Effects on Overall Health

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May 20, 2002 – Red wine may be food for your heart, but white wine seems best for your lung health, according to a study presented today at the American Thoracic Society's annual meeting.

It's the first study to tease out the different health affects of red and white wine, says lead author Holger J. Schunemann, MD, PhD, assistant professor of medicine and social preventive medicine in the University of Buffalo school of Medicine and Biomedical Sciences in New York.

"Other wine studies have traditionally focused on red wine, simply because it is more popular in Europe – where the majority of studies have been done – so it is easier to study Schunemann tells WebMD.

In fact, those studies have shown that a daily dose of 1 to 3 glasses of red wine can improve cardiovascular health, he says.

In their study, Schunemann and colleagues enrolled 1,555 men and women living in upstate New York. They questioned each about lifestyle and diet – and especially about the alcohol that they drank. They wanted to know what the person primarily drank (wine, beer, alcohol, coolers), how much they had drunk over their lifetime (by decade), and how much they'd imbibed in the past 30 days.

Researchers also measured aspects of breathing, such as lung capacity, that may serve as an indicator of general health. "Lung function has also been shown to be a strong predictor of heart disease," he says.

"We found that white wine intake was strongly associated with better [lung] function," Schunemann says. "Red wine also had a positive effect on breathing capability, but it was "somewhat weaker."

The data: One glass of wine per day equaled a 1.5% higher lung function, adding one or two more years to the person's life; three glasses a day improved lung capacity by 3%.

By that measure, six glasses of wine should bring a 4% improvement, Schunemann says.

"Other studies have shown that the more wine you drink, the greater the effects," he tells WebMD. But he's not suggesting that everybody drink more wine or more alcohol. "There are all sorts of negative effects from alcohol drinking."

In compiling his findings, Schunemann took into account each person's smoking habits, weight, eating habits and lung function – factors that would skew his results. After all, he says, “white wine drinkers are more likely to eat a healthier diet and are less likely to smoke than those who drink beer or other types of alcohol exclusively. They're also more likely to be women.”

He speculates that white wine drinkers have higher levels of vitamin antioxidants in their blood.

Grape juice could have a similar effect – but a bowlful of grapes, as vitamin-packed as they are, won't work as well as wine, Schunemann tells WebMD.

“There are processes in winemaking that provide additional antioxidants that we think are in part responsible for this [impact on lung function],” he says.