

Latest health scare: Sobriety increases your chance of a heart attack. Like other health scares, it's a bit overdone.

Wishful thinking

By Suzanne Jennings

IT WAS A RAY OF HOPE for the liquor industry, which is facing declining sales in the U.S. and will no doubt get clobbered with a sin tax one of these days in order to pay for health care. The hot news was that moderate drinking cuts the risk of heart attacks.

Don't open a bottle of champagne just yet. The theory that teetotaling is bad for you could turn out to be another health scare like Alar and cyclamates: only faintly true, and likely to lead to bad decisions if taken too seriously.

The news stories calling moderate drinking a preventer of coronary artery disease started surfacing in November 1991. Kaiser Permanente Medical Center, for example, has released data that suggest drinkers of wine, liquor and beer are all less likely to develop fatal clogging of their coronary arteries than nondrinkers.

Another version of the theory that bad things are good for you comes from the land of bon vivants. A French diet of red wine and hard cheese is not as conducive to heart disease as might be expected, given the deadly saturated fat content of the cheese.

The problem with these health reports is one shared by many a report on eating or environmental hazards: They report correlations, not cause and effect. If moderate drinkers don't have as many heart attacks as nondrinkers, is that because of the drinking or in spite of it? Perhaps moderate drinkers happen to be the sort of people who exercise more. Statisticians, of course, make an attempt to eliminate the effects of extraneous factors, but they can't possibly eliminate all of them because they can't

know them all.

One hypothesis is that alcohol is protective because of its ability to raise blood levels of high-density lipoproteins, the so-called good cholesterol. HDL reduces the clogging of coronary arteries, thereby decreasing the risk of heart attack.

But this is just a hypothesis. It could be that the alcohol itself is of no health benefit. One study claims that the



benefits of drinking are limited to red wine. Red wine has a variety of non-alcoholic compounds that could include the coronary disease preventive.

Weigh this against the risks associated with drinking, even moderate drinking: stroke, breast cancer, birth defects, hypertension, alcoholism, car accidents. A study reported in 1989 in *Stroke* concludes that moderate alcohol consumption increases the risk of strokes caused by bleeding, although it decreases the risk of strokes caused by blocked blood vessels. In the coronary artery, which supplies the heart muscle with oxygen, bleeding is not an issue; the killer is blockage. So the alcohol may be reducing the risk of a fatal coronary at the same time it increases the risk of a fatal cerebral hemorrhage.

Another study, reported in 1987 in the *New England Journal of Medicine*, suggests that breast cancer is about 50% more likely to develop in women who consume three to nine drinks per week than in women who drink less than that. For women of childbearing age, there is also the possibility that any exposure to alcohol, even a very small one, risks damage to a fetus.

Research sponsored by the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse & Alcoholism further drains hopes for social drinkers who want medical justification. Dr. Sam Zakhari, chief of biomedical research at the institute, summarized the earlier finding that concludes that alcohol consumption at all levels increases the risk of cerebral hemorrhage. He also believes that, based on epidemiological studies,

moderate drinking may induce a slight increase in blood pressure in men. In addition, the institute found that drinking, even in moderation, can produce adverse effects in those suffering from heart disease (such as cardiomyopathy, the inflammation of the heart muscle) or taking cardiovascular medication (such as drugs to control irregular heartbeat or high blood pressure).

Zakhari concedes that moderate drinking can, on balance, be good for some people. But he doesn't recommend drinking alcohol to ensure cardiovascular health. Ponder this: One in ten drinkers is an alcoholic, and every individual in that 10% started out as a social drinker.

Says Ford Brewer, a physician at Executive Health Group, a national organization used by many senior executives for annual exams: "We tell our patients that until there are clearer indications, the choice is theirs. But a glass of alcohol per day is not the only way they can improve their cardiovascular health."

"If they're drinking a glass of red wine daily, I'll tell them it's okay to continue, but I won't tell them to start," says James Slater, a physician in New Canaan, Conn. "I never tell anyone that alcohol is good." ■