

Letter to the Editor: The Pundit Speaks

By Randolph M. Howes, M.D., Ph.D.

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“Alcohol Can Cause Cancer”

In 1988, the International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC) declared alcohol to be a cancer causing agent (carcinogen). But, today we hear the mantra of "responsible drinking" which promotes or gives one a free pass to drink alcohol in moderation. So, let's look at the incriminating data against alcohol consumption, which says that no amount of alcohol is safe. Actually, that is the conclusion of the 2014 World Cancer Report (WCR), issued by the World Health Organization's IARC. The report says that the more alcohol that a person drinks, the higher the risk. The alcohol/cancer link has been strengthened by the finding of a dose/response relationship between alcohol consumption and certain cancers. And here is the kicker: a causal relationship exists between alcohol consumption and cancers of the mouth, pharynx, larynx, esophagus, colon-rectum, liver, and female breast; a significant relationship also exists between alcohol consumption and pancreatic cancer. Wow! Further, links have also been made between alcohol consumption and leukemia; multiple myeloma; and cancers of the cervix, vulva, vagina, and skin, but fewer studies have looked at these relationships and more research is needed to establish a confirmed association (causation). For bladder, lung, and stomach cancers, the evidence for an alcohol-cancer link is confused. We are often cautioned about the difference between "association" and "causation." But in the case of alcohol, a leading expert said, "For the cancers that have been identified as being causally linked with alcohol, we are absolutely certain that alcohol causes these cancers." So, does even "light drinking" cause or contribute to cancer? According to the experts, it does. In a meta-analysis of 222 studies comprising 92,000 light drinkers and 60,000 nondrinkers with cancer, "light drinking" was associated with risk for oropharyngeal cancer, esophageal squamous cell carcinoma, and female breast cancer but it was not associated with cancer of the colon-rectum, liver, or larynx. Please remember that some of these studies rely on self-reported questionnaires, which can result in finding associations between cancer and light to moderate drinking, when in reality, alcohol intake was much higher. Experts admit the biochemical mechanisms that mediate alcohol-related cancer are not fully understood but alcoholic beverages can contain at least 15 carcinogenic compounds, including acetaldehyde, acrylamide, aflatoxins, arsenic, benzene, cadmium, ethanol, ethyl carbamate, formaldehyde, and lead. Ethanol is the most important carcinogen in alcoholic beverages. The first and most toxic product of alcohol metabolism is acetaldehyde and it occurs naturally in alcoholic beverages. Even low doses of alcohol in direct contact with the upper aerodigestive tract (pharynx, oral cavity, esophagus, larynx) can increase the risk for cancer.

In the America that I love, I encourage everyone to "think before you drink ." Still, the decision is strictly yours alone.

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