

Letter to the Editor: The Pundit Speaks

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

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“Alcohol Can Trigger Atrial Fibrillation”

A new study, presented at the American College of Cardiology's 70th Annual Scientific Session, found that alcohol appears to have an immediate effect on heart rhythm, significantly increasing the chance that an episode of atrial fibrillation (AFib) will occur. AFib is the most common heart rhythm disorder. It is often characterized by a rapid, chaotic and fluttery heartbeat. People can experience a range of symptoms. Some may not feel anything, while others are overcome with severe shortness of breath, fatigue, fainting or near fainting spells and a disconcerting sensation that the heart is beating out of control. AFib also results in costly use of health care services, including visits to the emergency department, hospitalizations, and procedures each year. Over time, AFib can lead to heart failure, stroke, and dementia, if untreated. Gregory M. Marcus, MD, cardiologist, and professor of medicine at the University of California, San Francisco, said “Based on our data, we found that alcohol can acutely influence the likelihood that an episode of AFib will occur within a few hours, and the more alcohol consumed, the higher the risk of having an event.” Overall, more than half (56) had an episode of AFib during the four-week study. “Patients have been telling us that alcohol is a trigger for AFib for a long time, but it's been hard, if not impossible, to study because there is a critical temporal relationship that requires a real-time assessment of alcohol intake and heart rhythm,” Marcus said. “This is the first study to objectively demonstrate and quantify the real-time relationship between alcohol consumption and AFib episodes. While this study was limited to people with intermittent AFib, it's reasonable to extrapolate the fact that in many people alcohol may be the main trigger for an initial episode.” Marcus said there may be other factors — such as race/ethnicity, sex, genetics, or other environmental exposures — that influence alcohol's effect on the heart in various ways and need to be studied. In addition, people often pair alcohol with foods that are high in sodium, while some pour a drink because they feel stressed, so there may be other things that play a role. The findings also run counter to previous reports about the potentially protective role of alcohol on heart health when used in moderation. There is conventional wisdom that alcohol is 'good' or 'healthy' for the heart, based on observational studies, but that relates to coronary heart disease and heart attack. These new data present an interesting conundrum regarding the overall risks versus benefits of alcohol in moderation.

In the America that I love, the general recommendation for daily alcohol consumption is no more than one standard alcoholic beverage a day for women and two for men.

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