

# Opinion

## One Winedrinker's Opinion

Wine and Your Health  
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*"Wine nourishes, refreshes and cheers.  
Whenever wine is lacking, medicines  
become necessary" — from "The Talmud"*

For centuries, the medicinal properties of wine have been recognized by numerous cultures. Over the past 30 years, the health benefits of moderate wine consumption have been a source of controversy and have presented dilemmas for the practicing physician. Should moderate wine consumption be advocated as a preventative therapy for patients at risk for cardiovascular disease? The answer should be a resounding "Yes" — with a caveat that the risk/benefit ratio be thoughtfully considered for individual patients who may be adversely affected by alcohol in any form.

In the early 1970s, Dr. Serge Renaud was intrigued by data emanating from the Framingham study that described how low-dose alcohol consumption had protected this study population against death from coronary heart disease. He hypothesized that alcohol's beneficial effect on platelet aggregation (clumping and clotting) might be responsible for this finding, and proceeded to study this fascinating question.

Many issues arise when we are confronted with convincing data regarding wine consumption: One: Does moderate daily consumption

of wine have a place in American life? Two: What is the mechanism of action in producing this beneficial effect? Three: Who would benefit most from this most pleasant form of medication? And four: What should physicians be concerned about in recommending moderate amounts of wine?

I'd like to offer my opinion as a cardiovascular surgeon, winemaker, oenologist and future potential cardiovascular disease patient. Numerous leaders in the field of wine and health research have studied the issue in great depth and have concluded that while we don't have an absolute explanation for the positive effects that this spirit provides, we know more now about the biological actions that occur due to its ingestion.

The major therapeutic effects produced by wine, especially red wine, are due to its pronounced influences on the endothelial lining of the artery. They include: increasing *good* (HDL) and decreasing *bad* (LDL) cholesterol (thereby decreasing plaque build-up along the walls of the artery which leads to atherosclerosis); reducing the tendency for blood to clump and clot, which nor-

mally causes obstruction of the vessels; and also relaxing and lowering blood pressure. The active ingredient involved in these effects is a substance called nitric oxide, which is found in significant quantities in wine. As well, flavonoids and phenols, compounds found in high concentrations in red wine significantly impact this therapeutic process, while sulfides in wine may also provide protective antioxidant activities implicated in reducing risks for developing certain types of cancer.

Since moderate and responsible drinkers have few adverse effects, the protective therapeutic benefits against heart and peripheral vascular disease, and strokes related to embolic (clot) origin, are so significant that it could be construed as negligent and unethical *not* to offer information on wine's positive attributes. Those patients who have multiple risk factors for developing cardiovascular disease, such as family history, high blood pressure, hypercholesterolemia and a sedentary lifestyle with high-fat diet, would most benefit from this daily libation.

As the literature is replete with studies too numerous to reference that extol and support a weight of evidence for the positive health effects of wine drinking, I would be remiss as a physician to disregard information that offers some protective hedge against cardiovascular disease. One worries about overindulgence, and to that I must remark that, as in most endeavors, moderation is key.

Backed by extensive scientific data, I typically recommend three glasses, (two for women) of wine daily, preferably red, to my patients, colleagues and friends. Wine should not be viewed as an alcoholic beverage. It is a pleasant-tasting health food dispensed in liquid form that should be taken with meals and at bedtime.

I enthusiastically agree with Sir William Osler who said nearly 100 years ago, "Wine is milk for the aged."