

# ALCOHOL AND CARDIOVASCULAR DISEASE

The relationship between alcohol and cardiovascular disease is complex, dependent upon many factors, and mediated by the volume and pattern of alcohol consumption.

## Fact 1

Cardiovascular diseases (CVD) are the **leading cause of death in the world** and in most of the countries of the Americas, where they cause 1.9 million deaths per year.

## Fact 2

Alcohol use can lead to **high blood pressure, heart failure, or stroke**, while there is much debate in the scientific literature about the effects of low levels of drinking.

## Fact 3

**Alcohol consumption can increase the risk of CVD**, including:

- Cardiomyopathy
- Hypertension
- Atrial fibrillation
- Hemorrhagic stroke
- Ischemic heart disease
- Ischemic stroke

**Low levels of alcohol consumption**, as low as 5 g of alcohol (half a drink a day), may provide a small protective effect against ischemic heart disease. **However:**

- **Most people drink above these levels.** In the Americas, most drinkers on average drink above the levels that can offer any protection, and 25% report heavy episodic drinking.<sup>1</sup>

- **Low-level drinkers who engage in heavy episodic drinking have an increased risk of CVD.**

- The greater a person's average alcohol consumption, the higher the risk of CVD.

- The effects of alcohol on CVD per standard drink of beer, spirits, and wine consumed are similar. **No additional benefit is associated with red wine.**

## RECOMMENDATIONS

**DO NOT START DRINKING ALCOHOL FOR BETTER HEART HEALTH.** Protection and health benefits can be achieved through healthy diet and exercise.

To improve your heart health, **REDUCE YOUR DRINKING.**

If you are concerned about how your alcohol use is affecting your health, **TALK TO YOUR PRIMARY HEALTH CARE PROFESSIONAL.**

<sup>1</sup> \* Heavy episodic drinking is defined as 60+ grams of pure alcohol for men, and 40+ grams for women, on at least one occasion monthly. Given that one standard drink contains 10 g of pure alcohol, that is roughly 6 standard drinks for men, and 4 standard drinks for women.

### SOURCES

- Pan American Health Organization. Regional Status Report on Alcohol and Health 2020. Washington, DC: PAHO; 2020. Available from: <https://iris.paho.org/handle/10665.2/52705>.
- Piano MR. Alcohol's Effects on the Cardiovascular System. Alcohol Res. 2017;38(2):219–41. Available from: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5513687/>.
- Wood AM, Kaptoge S, Butterworth AS, Willeit P, Warnakula S, Bolton T, et al. Risk thresholds for alcohol consumption: combined analysis of individual-participant data for 599 912 current drinkers in 83 prospective studies. Lancet. 2018;391(10129):1513–23. Available from: [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(18\)30134-X/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(18)30134-X/fulltext).