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NASEM Report Ignites Discussion on Alcohol Consumption

Report indicates moderate drinkers have a 16% lower risk of death from all causes

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Moderate alcohol consumption has reignited debate in the United States following the release of a report by the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (NASEM). The document suggests that drinking in moderation may reduce the risk of mortality compared to total abstinence. Specifically, the study indicates a 16% lower risk of death from all causes among individuals who consume alcohol moderately.

The report also highlights that moderate alcohol intake reduces the risk of cardiovascular diseases. Moderate drinkers have a 22% lower likelihood of experiencing a heart attack and an 11% reduced risk of stroke compared to non-drinkers. These conditions accounted for over 850,000 deaths in 2022, making them leading causes of mortality in the United States.

However, the report acknowledges that alcohol consumption is not without risks. It warns of a 10% increased likelihood of developing breast cancer and a potential, though statistically insignificant, rise in the risk of colorectal cancer. Despite these risks, the cardiovascular benefits linked to moderate drinking appear to outweigh cancer-related risks, particularly for individuals under 60 years of age.

In response to these findings, former U.S. Surgeon General Vivek Murthy, who was replaced with the arrival of the Trump administration, proposed adding cancer risk warnings to alcohol labels. This recommendation, which requires congressional approval, has drawn criticism from various sectors, including the wine industry and some public health experts.

The debate has also reached Congress, which is set to review new dietary guidelines related to alcohol consumption. The NASEM report, commissioned to provide scientific evidence on the subject, could play a significant role in shaping these discussions. However, differing studies and recommendations from other entities, such as the Interagency Coordinating Committee on the Prevention of Underage Drinking, may complicate the development of clear policies.

Similar efforts to limit recommended alcohol consumption have been observed in countries like Canada. After initial resistance, Canada adopted guidelines capping weekly alcohol intake at 10 drinks for women and 15 for men. In the United States, such limits remain under consideration.

Experts like Laura Catena, a physician and director of a winery in Argentina, regard the NASEM report as one of the most rigorous studies to date. Catena notes that moderate alcohol consumption offers not only physical benefits but also social ones, provided it is done responsibly.

The debate over alcohol's impact on public health is not new, but the NASEM report underscores the importance of balancing its benefits and risks. The ultimate outcome will depend on how legislators and public health agencies incorporate this evidence into future policies.