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Spanish study links moderate wine consumption to reduced cardiovascular risk

Research from the University of Barcelona highlights wine's potential heart benefits, though findings may not apply to all populations.

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A recent Spanish study has added weight to the ongoing debate about the health benefits of moderate wine consumption. Conducted by researchers from the University of Barcelona and other institutions, the study used a novel method to confirm the link between wine consumption and reduced cardiovascular disease risk in older adults. This comes amid contrasting views on alcohol's health impacts. A federal committee recently reported that moderate drinkers have lower all-cause mortality, while the U.S. Surgeon General called for cancer warnings on alcoholic beverages.

The Spanish study, published in the European Heart Journal, analyzed data from 1,232 participants with an average age of 68. These individuals were part of the PREDIMED trial, which examines the Mediterranean diet's effects on cardiovascular health. Unlike previous studies that relied on self-reported drinking habits, this research measured alcohol consumption through tartaric acid levels in urine. This biological marker provided a more accurate assessment of wine intake, allowing researchers to draw stronger conclusions about its impact on heart health.

Over a nine-year follow-up period, the study found that light-to-moderate wine consumption was associated with a lower risk of cardiovascular events, particularly heart attacks. The researchers suggest that polyphenols and other bioactive compounds in wine may contribute to this reduced risk. Participants who consumed between 3 and 35 glasses of wine per month showed a significant decrease in cardiovascular risk. Those drinking between 12 and 35 glasses per month experienced a slightly greater reduction compared to those consuming 3 to 12 glasses. However, drinking less than 3 or more than 35 glasses per month did not yield significant benefits.

The study's authors acknowledge that wine was not the sole source of alcohol for participants, and further research is needed to understand how other alcoholic beverages might affect heart health. They also caution that the findings may not be applicable to other populations, as the study focused on an older Mediterranean group at high risk for cardiovascular disease. The association between wine consumption and heart health was weaker among female participants, possibly due to fewer cardiovascular events in this subgroup.

Although the study is observational and cannot establish causation, the researchers controlled for various factors such as age, sex, smoking, education, and physical activity. They emphasize that the observed benefits should be attributed to wine consumption alone. An editorial accompanying the study, written by researchers from the European Neurological Institute in Italy, supports the findings. It highlights the study's robust evidence linking moderate wine consumption to lower cardiovascular disease risk, even after accounting for potential biases.

While a randomized controlled trial on moderate wine consumption's health effects remains elusive, this study represents a significant step forward. It addresses common criticisms of alcohol research, such as the inclusion of former drinkers in control groups and lifestyle-related confounding factors. As the debate over alcohol's health impacts continues, this study provides valuable insights into the potential benefits of moderate wine consumption for heart health.