

# Moderation is key when adding alcohol into healthy diet

My friends have decided to observe “Dry January,” a tradition to abstain from alcohol to start a behavior change. The campaign started in the United Kingdom in 2013 and is popular in many bars in the U.S. I thought there were health benefits from drinking red wine. Can you tell us more about health, diet, and alcohol? — JF, Greenville

Since the first Dietary Guidelines for Americans in 1980, the recommendation has been, “If you drink alcohol, do so in moderation,” and that a small amount of wine, beer or spirits could be included in a healthy diet.

The 2020-25 edition adds more discussion of alcohol’s risks of harm. It recommends that “adults of legal drinking age can choose not to drink or to drink in moderation.”



KATHY KOLASA

For the first time it specifically says that individuals who do not drink alcohol should not start drinking for any reason. And, if adults of legal drinking age choose to drink alcoholic beverages, drinking less is better for health than drinking more.

Today and next week, Bryce Pugh, a first-year Brody medical



AFRICA STUDIO/SHUTTERSTOCK

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student with an interest in neurosurgery and a passion for brain health will tell you about alcohol’s role in our health.

Do you know what alcohol does to your body? This question is overlooked as we toast special moments or relax with a drink. Alcohol is a part of our culture, but the effects of drinking on our health are still debated. We hope after reading these two columns you will take an informed and health-conscious approach to drinking.

It is clear that drinking too much alcohol is bad for you. However, there are mixed messages about moderate drinking. Some experts say a glass of wine a day is good for your heart; others say any alcohol is risky.

Our current understanding is that while too much alcohol is harmful, moderate amounts may have benefits. Experts still don’t know enough to be sure. Cancer experts state that alcohol increases the risk of several cancers and some, like breast cancer, pose risks even at low levels of intake. They acknowledge, as do heart experts, that small amounts of alcohol can decrease risk of from heart disease. Experts in heart disease and high blood pressure say that a healthy diet CAN include one to two servings of alcohol a day for men and one serving a day for women.

There are some adults who should not drink at all. You have seen warnings that pregnant

women should abstain as alcohol can cause permanent intellectual, behavioral and physical disabilities to the child, sometimes even causing a miscarriage.

Other adults have been cautioned by their doctors that their health conditions or medications may react badly with alcohol, and there are those who cannot limit their intake. And of course, activities that require focus, like driving or taking important exams, should not include alcohol.

What is a serving? By definition, a standard alcoholic drink has about half an ounce or 14 grams of pure alcohol, which gives you about 100 calories. That would be the amount in 12 ounces of regular beer, which is about 5% alcohol; 5 ounces of wine, which is about 12% alcohol; or 1.5 ounces of distilled spirits, which is about 40% alcohol.

Next week, we’ll give details on how drinks that exceed this definition by increased size or percent alcohol by volume (ABV) affect your nutrient intake as they would be more than “a serving.” For most, the health effects of having one drink or two shouldn’t cause worry.

The problem is excessive or binge drinking — four or five drinks in one sitting. Yearly, it causes about 90% of the 100,000 alcohol-related deaths in the U.S. Heavy drinking is linked to heart problems, strokes, cancer, mental health issues, sleep disorders and a higher risk of dying from any cause.

Drinking also can lead to excess weight gain. If you are drinking heavily perhaps participating in “Dry January” can help you adjust your drinking habits. Quitting excessive drinking suddenly or “cold turkey” might cause more harm than good and possibly lead to withdrawal symptoms or even death. Talk with your doctor about your drinking habits and health and your registered dietitian nutritionist about weight gain.

The brain is a very complex organ, and alcohol has a strong effect on it. Alcohol can change the balance of serotonin — a natural chemical that regulates mood. It can cause inflammation or swelling of the brain and can disrupt your memory. Some say alcohol helps them sleep. It may help you fall asleep but it disrupts the quality of your sleep, preventing your brain from getting needed rest.

Remember that knowledge is essential in making healthier choices. While enjoying a drink can be part of a balanced life, it’s important to know when to drink, how much is okay, and what kind of drink to choose.

Next week, we’ll look more specifically at different types of alcoholic drinks and their unique impacts on our health.

**Professor emeritus Kathy Kolasa**, a registered dietitian nutritionist and Ph.D., is an affiliate professor in the Brody School of Medicine at ECU. Contact her at kolasaka@ecu.edu.

## ASK THE DOCTORS

### Bright light therapy is one treatment plan for SAD

Each year when we switch away from daylight saving time, I get that SAD thing. I start feeling low and eventually get depressed. Why does that happen? I’ve read there are special lights that can help and would like to know more about that.

You are one of the estimated 20 million people in the United States dealing with a condition known as seasonal affective disorder, or SAD. First identified in the mid-1980s, it is a type of depression tied to the cycle of the changing seasons. In the majority of cases, SAD is triggered by the waning light at the close of the year.

Symptoms often appear in autumn, peak in January and February and ease with the lengthening days of springtime. For about 10% of people, it’s the spring and summer months that trigger the onset of symptoms. These differ from winter-pattern SAD.

In winter-pattern SAD, people may experience sadness, hopelessness or depression; loss of energy; lack of interest in usual activities; increased irritability; an inability to feel happiness or joy; increased sleep; difficulty rousing in the morning; increased appetite; and social withdrawal. Individuals with summer SAD often become anxious, feel restless



EVE GLAZIER



ELIZABETH KO

or agitated, experience a loss of appetite and develop disordered sleep or insomnia.

The causes of either form of the disorder are not yet clear. However, light-driven chemical changes in the brain, possibly including an under- or overproduction of melatonin, are suspected to play a role. Studies have found lower levels of serotonin, a brain chemical that helps regulate mood, in people with winter-pattern SAD.

The light therapy you are asking about, known as bright light therapy, has proven beneficial for many people with winter-onset SAD. It involves daily exposure of 30 to 40 minutes to a light box. This is a device outfitted with specific types of full-spectrum bulbs that mimic natural outdoor light.

Light boxes can be extremely bright and may not be appropriate for everyone. Bright light therapy is often used in combination with additional forms of treatment, including

antidepressants, exercise and talk or cognitive behavior therapy.

For people who know they have SAD, planning ahead can be helpful. The cyclic nature of the condition makes this possible. It’s a good idea to begin to exercise more as the summer draws to a close, as being physically active has been shown to help ease symptoms of depression. If you do use a light box, begin a few weeks before your symptoms typically appear. And if it’s possible, plan a getaway during the darkest days of winter. If a visit to a sunnier location isn’t possible, time off that frees you from being indoors all the time can help.

Anyone who suspects they have winter-onset SAD should see their health care provider. The symptoms overlap with several other conditions, which need to be ruled out. These can include anemia, major depression and some thyroid disorders. If SAD is the diagnosis, your doctor can help craft your individual approach to therapy and offer support throughout the winter months. If symptoms don’t ease as sunlight returns, be sure to let your doctor know.

**Eve Glazier, M.D., MBA**, is an internist and associate professor of medicine at UCLA Health. **Elizabeth Ko, M.D.**, is an internist and assistant professor of medicine at UCLA Health.

## Americans have a snacking problem, analysis suggests

**NANCY CLANTON**  
Atlanta Journal-Constitution

Americans averaged 400–500 calories in snacks per day that offered little to no nutritional value, a new study revealed.

“Snacks constitute almost a quarter of a day’s calories in U.S. adults and account for about one-third of daily added sugar, a new study suggests,” researchers at Ohio State University wrote in a press release published on medicalexpress.com. “Snacks are contributing a meal’s worth of intake to what we eat without it actually being a meal,” he said. “You know what dinner is going to be: a protein, a side dish or two. But if you eat a meal of what you eat for snacks, it becomes a completely different scenario of, generally, carbohydrates, sugars, not much protein, not much fruit, not a vegetable. So it’s not a fully well-rounded meal.”

For their study, the researchers analyzed survey data from more than 20,000 people.

Participants with Type 2 diabetes snacked less often and consumed fewer sugary foods than those who weren’t diabetic, the analysis found.

“Diabetes education looks like it’s working, but we might need to bump education back to people who are at risk for diabetes and even to people with normal blood glucose levels to start improving dietary behaviors before people develop chronic disease,” Taylor said.

Among all respondents, snacks accounted for 19.5% to 22.4% of total calorie intake but added little nutrition.

Snacks consisted mostly of convenience foods high in carbohydrates and fats, followed by sweets, alcoholic beverages, non-alcoholic drinks that included sugar-sweetened beverages, protein, milk and dairy, fruits, grains and, far behind, vegetables.

Taylor suggested we plan our snacks the same way we plan our meals, to ensure we have something that provides nutrition.



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