Another Danger at the Bar
Is This Another Cancer to Blame on Alcohol?
Libations of Regret

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In recent years, numerous studies have touted the benefits of moderate drinking. Whether it's good heart or brain, in modest amounts, ethanol is supposed to be a libation that's good to the last drop. Good news for the industry, and for all those minions who delight in most any occasion to "roll out the barrel." Your HealthWise reporter affirms that it's time to be chary.

Let's take a look at alcohol as a cancer promoter; a brain-pleasing villain with a sinister spin. It's no secret that cancer of the mouth, the pharynx and clear down the esophagus is alcohol-induced. Perhaps that's too blunt, so let's say "causally related." Take a side trip to the liver and then on down the peristaltic way through to the colon. It's still there – this association between the outlaw alcohol and cancers of the colon and liver. Not good at all.

Now the cancer talk relates to alcohol and the breast. Unbelievable? No, not entirely. For a couple of decades now, studies have pointed a tentative, almost reluctant finger at drinking and breast cancer deaths. The linkage is dose-related. That is, the more one indulges, the more the cancer risk. But a little alcohol is okay, isn't it? Supposed to be healthy, we thought. The word is that even a drink or two daily, a moderate intake, is too much. Indeed, as one author put it recently, "Alcohol intake is one of the few modifiable breast cancer risk factors yet identified."

It doesn't require rocket-science-intellect to cite alcohol for cancer of the throat and esophagus. It's an irritant. Chronic irritation is seed-with-fertilizer for cancer. But breast cancer and alcohol? How come? Well, for now, there are more theories than answers. But let's take a try at a simply hypothesis or two. For beginners, ethanol generates those dangerous little free radicals; those skulking little contributors to tumor turnout.

Consider another theory, one related to estrogens. Ethanol and estrogens (along with other gender-related hormones) wend their way throughout the circulation, constantly bathing the cells. Breast cells respond to estrogens, and may react in either of two directions. In the desirable direction, it's the feminine mystique. In the opposite, hand-in-hand with alcohol, it's breast tissue gone awry, now cancer-prone.

Have we opened Pandora's box? And should we close it post-haste? For sure, we need more research. We must tease out the webs that link alcohol, breast cancer, family risk, and even body size. Remember that obesity and breast cancer are deadly pals. Then, does family risk combine with liquor to magnify tumor proliferation? Research is in the works. Before long, we'll know more.

Meanwhile, ladies, if you don’t drink, don’t start. If you drink, quit. If you won’t quit outright, then limit your libations to less than one weekly. If you can do that, it won’t be long before you have...
become a "once upon a time drinker." Considering everything, it's worth it.

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