

Late Breaking News: Let's Talk About Alcohol Consumption and Health Outcomes - Frankly Speaking EP 31

Transcript Details

This is a transcript of an episode from the podcast series "Frankly Speaking" accessible at Pri-Med.com. Additional media formats for this podcast are available by visiting <http://www.pri-med.com/online-education/Podcast/alcohol-frankly-speaking-ep-31.aspx>

Dr. Frank Domino:

Jim presents today for a physical. He's a 60-year-old male and he's recently retired. His goal in retirement is to focus on healthy aging. Besides the usual screening recommendations, he asks about alcohol use. He has increased his alcohol intake since retirement and his wife is concerned it might cause some trouble with his memory. Joining me today is Jill Terrien, adult nurse practitioner and Director of the Nurse Practitioner Program at the University of Massachusetts Medical School, Graduate School of Nursing. Welcome to the show, Jill.

Jill Terrien:

Thank you, Frank.

Dr. Frank Domino:

This recent article in the British Medical Journal talks a bit about alcohol and its correlation with cognition. Can you tell us a little bit about how it was done?

Jill Terrien:

Absolutely. They have a large observational cohort study that's ongoing in the UK. It's the Whitehall II Study and it actually looked at a subset of that population, about 450 males and 100 females.

Dr. Frank Domino:

And they compared their frequency of alcohol intake to what kind of outcomes?

Jill Terrien:

They actually tracked their weekly alcohol intake, the number of units per week, they looked at a series of cognitive testing over time, as well as an MRI of the brain to look at the hippocampal area.

Dr. Frank Domino:

Wow, that's some study. What outcomes did they find?

Jill Terrien:

Well, their overall outcomes in the study is that moderate drinkers, those drinkers that drink between 14 and 21 units of alcohol a week, actually had three times the risk of having hippocampal atrophy and a decrease in some of their word recall and semantic fluency.

Dr. Frank Domino:

So 14 to 21 drinks in a week seems to correlate with some adverse brain outcomes?

Jill Terrien:

It's interesting. As I looked at this study and looked at how they defined what is a standard drink, it led me to look at what we do in the US for a standard drink, and then I also looked at an article that talked globally about what a standard drink is. In this study particularly, a drink is eight grams of alcohol, which is typically... We'll just generalize: One beer, five ounces of wine, or one-and-a-half ounces of spirits, more or less. And typical to our standards, they define women less than 14 units a week as moderate drinking, or seven to 14 units of drinks per week for women, and 14 to 21 units per week for men were defined as moderate drinkers.

Dr. Frank Domino:

Okay, so it sounds like the moderate drinking had some of the worst influence, and how we define it's a little bit different. So Jill, how did they define what was moderate alcohol intake, and how does that differ between the US and the UK?

Jill Terrien:

It's really hard to make a one-to-one comparison. The UK, since the study, has lowered their unit of drink to eight grams of alcohol. The US defines it as 14 grams of alcohol, and there is no worldwide consensus.

Dr. Frank Domino:

Interesting, interesting.

Jill Terrien:

So it's a little bit about apples to oranges in how you interpret it.

Dr. Frank Domino:

So it sounds like moderate alcohol intake may have some adverse CNS effects. But besides cognition, what are some of the other recent publications saying about alcohol intake and outcomes? Any thoughts on heart disease or mortality?

Jill Terrien:

Yes. Actually, late-breaking news, the Journal of the American College of Cardiology just came out with a very large study. It involved over 300,000 participants and it just came out recently. And their findings are that moderate alcohol consumption actually, controlling for all-cause mortality, has a protective effect.

Dr. Frank Domino:

Wow, so some degree of alcohol intake may be protective on all-cause mortality. Were they able to tell us how much is acceptable, and at what point we cross the line?

Jill Terrien:

Yes. If we talk about number of drinks per week, and you look at the standard measurement based on NIDA, because we are in the US and this was a US study, it's defined as one drink a day for women, one to two drinks not more than a few days a week, but basically seven drinks or less a week is recommended for women to be moderate. And up to 14 drinks a week for men, and that's saying basically two drinks a day.

Dr. Frank Domino:

Wow, so while there may be some adverse influence of drinking that much alcohol on your brain, you get to live longer.

Jill Terrien:

That's right. And it's interesting, Frank, this is a pretty big study and it's pretty well-defined. There's also a few other studies that have come out in the British Medical Journal that have talked about moderate alcohol consumption and lowering cardiovascular... And they call it hard outcomes, so I'm guessing death or procedural-type things, as a result of moderate drinking of alcohol. And also in diabetes, there was a Danish study that talked about diabetics, and they found that actually the risk of diabetes did not increase if people were drinking three to four days a week.

Dr. Frank Domino:

Very interesting. So we've got a great deal of data. We have data that shows alcohol may influence cognitive function in a negative way. We have some data that shows it improves cardiovascular and possibly diabetes outcomes, which is counterintuitive. We also know that, in women in particular, alcohol increases the risk of breast cancer. And in men increases the risk of adverse liver outcomes. We have a wide range of data points. What do we tell patients?

Jill Terrien:

I'm thinking of our patient Jim. Since he came in and he is asking about healthy aging, I wanna

know... Specifically, yes, his wife is worried about his memory and his cognition, but let's talk about what is his routine now. Has he seen it change, especially with retirement? We do know people will drink more socially. So if he's had more social engagements, maybe he's taken up golf or he's golfing more. But I think it's just exploring with the patient what their concerns are and giving them guidelines to go by. If you're finding out that your patient is drinking five drinks a day every weekend, two days a week, is there something we can do to decrease that? 'Cause we know that more than three to four drinks a day is not good for either gender.

Dr. Frank Domino:

Very interesting. Well, I think this paper adds another piece to the puzzle that we need to keep in mind. And we need to be sensitive to our patients when they bring up alcohol or when we bring up alcohol, to maybe screen them a little bit more closely and help them understand some of the risks and benefits. Thanks for bringing this forward, Jill.

Jill Terrien:

Thank you, Frank.

Dr. Frank Domino:

Practice pointer: Alcohol correlates with a variety of outcomes, some adverse like changes in cognition, and some possibly better like decreased rates of heart disease and all-cause mortality. None of these studies recommend for those who abstain from alcohol to start drinking. Counsel your patients wisely and screen where you feel appropriate. Join us next time when we talk about the new guidelines concerning infant sleep patterns and lowering the risk of sleep-related deaths in infants and children.