

Risks: Fewer Heart Problems Among Moderate Drinkers

By NICHOLAS BAKALAR, Published: December 16, 2010

A new study suggests that what matters to your health is not how much alcohol you drink, but how and when you drink it.

For the study, in the journal *BMJ*, French scientists gathered data on the drinking habits of 2,405 men in Ireland and 7,373 in France, and found that the French drank more — an average of 1.2 ounces a day, compared with about three-quarters of an ounce for the Irish. Only 12 percent of the Irish drank every day, compared with 75 percent of the French. But among the Irish the rate of binge drinking was sharply higher: 9 percent, compared with 0.5 percent in France. (A binge was defined as five drinks or more at least one day a week.)

The scientists followed the men for 10 years. After controlling for smoking, cholesterol levels, blood pressure and other risks, they found that compared with regular drinkers, both binge drinkers and teetotalers were almost twice as likely to have had heart problems.

There are cultural differences in drinking habits, said the study's lead author, Dr. Jean Ferrières, a professor of medicine at Toulouse University.

"In France, fruits, vegetables and wine are consumed at the same meal," he said. "We think you can protect your heart by drinking daily with a complete meal. But we don't know how to disentangle the effect of wine from the other things."

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