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Our thanks to Hazelden for sharing this *Alive and Free* column covering a timely topic. Recovery Iowa News is delivered to your e-mail in plain text format.

Alcohol in any form is a dangerous drug; heavy drinkers at increased risk for cancer

Despite myths to the contrary, when it comes to alcohol, it's not what you drink, it's how much you drink.

For instance, when researchers at Kaiser Permanente in Oakland, Calif., studied the drinking habits of 70,000 multi-ethnic women between 1978-1985, they found that by 2004, nearly 3,000 of these women had contracted breast cancer. When they compared the role of total alcohol intake among those women with breast cancer, they found that a link between drinking and breast cancer held true regardless of whether the women drank beer, liquor or wine. Even when wine was divided into red and white, there was no difference.

The researchers grouped drinkers into three categories: light drinkers (less than one drink a day), moderate drinkers (one to two drinks a day) and heavy drinkers (three or more drinks a day). Compared to the light drinkers, the incidence of breast cancer jumped by 10 percent for moderate drinkers and by 30 percent for heavy drinkers.

Many drinkers have the misperception that when it comes to imbibing, wine (especially red wine) is good for you, beer isn't as bad as "hard liquor" or "spirits," and 3.2 or light beer hardly counts as an alcoholic beverage. Some of this confusion comes from studies that conclude that light to moderate drinking can protect against heart disease. But according to Dr. Yan Li, an oncologist involved in the Kaiser study, "None of these mechanisms are known to have anything to do with breast cancer."

Wine, beer and spirits all contain ethyl alcohol, and the amount of alcohol in standard servings of 5 ounces of wine, 12 ounces of regular beer or a wine cooler, and 1.5 ounces of 80 proof distilled spirits is the same, whether one drinks it straight or in a mixed drink. Ethyl alcohol—the substance that intoxicates—is the substance that increases the risk of breast cancer in moderate and heavy drinkers.

"No matter how you absorb it, alcohol is alcohol, and it takes the same amount of time to process regardless of the source," explained Chris Lind, RN, director of National Health Services at Hazelden.

Once alcohol is consumed, it is absorbed into an individual's blood system and can be measured as blood alcohol concentration (BAC). The rate of absorption varies according to an individual's height, weight, and the food ingested prior to drinking. Generally, the faster someone drinks, the more inebriated he or she will become, no matter what type of alcohol he or she consumes. And, says Lind, "If you drink enough of anything—even 3.2 beer—you can get drunk."

"The supposed benefits of alcohol consumption in reducing heart disease are not good enough reasons for people with alcoholism, or people at increased risk for alcoholism, to drink any amount of alcohol," continued Lind. "Any possible health benefits do not offset the risks. Alcohol—whether it is wine, liquor, strong beer, or 3.2 beer—will trigger relapse for the alcoholic. For someone with alcoholism, one glass of wine a day or a glass of 3.2 beer is a first step in the wrong direction. And, contrary to what some people believe, you can be an alcoholic and meet the criteria for addiction on 3.2 beer."

In these days of marketing glitz and glamour, where wine coolers are made to taste like soda and "light" beer is promoted as a safe, low-calorie refresher, it is more important than ever for consumers to do their homework. Drinking wine instead of beer or distilled liquor does not reduce the risks of inebriation or many other health consequences associated with drinking. Research indicates that alcohol use can contribute to the risk of various cancers, including cancer of the respiratory tract, upper digestive tract, liver, colon, and rectum. And like the link to breast cancer, links between alcohol and cancer are dose-dependent—that is, heavy drinkers have the greatest cancer risk.

For more information on the link between alcohol use and cancer, as well as a wide range of research on the effects of alcohol, visit the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism Web site at www.niaaa.gov.