

What you probably mean by moderate drinking, if you really think about it, is not drinking enough to damage your health. However if that is what you mean then you are almost certainly *not* drinking moderately, because you will still be damaging your health if only to a small extent. In 2012 Dr. Melanie Nichols and some colleagues of the British Heart Foundation Health Promotion Research Group at Oxford University analysed the annual death toll from eleven conditions known to be linked to long-term alcohol consumption. Yes, eleven! These included heart disease, stroke, high blood pressure, diabetes, cirrhosis of the liver, epilepsy and five different cancers.<sup>379</sup>

She and her team related these conditions to the alcohol consumption of the U.K. population, as reported in the General Household Survey of 2006. Her team related the amount people drank on a regular basis to their chances of contracting each disease, taking into account the fact that regularly drinking a small amount of alcohol appears to reduce the risk of coronary heart disease, probably by reducing the blood's ability to form clots. (Not a good idea if you cut yourself on the ring pull of your beer can!) They concluded that, on average, the overall risk of an alcohol-related death is at a minimum if one drinks 5gm or half a unit of alcohol a day. This is equivalent to less than half a small glass of wine or a quarter of a pint of beer, which is far less than the government's current recommended limits. If you drink anything more than half a unit of alcohol a day, the resulting additional protection afforded against heart disease is outweighed by the even greater increase in the risk of death from one of the other causes.

Yet that is not the whole story. Drinking a tiny amount of alcohol does appear to provide a small overall benefit to people who are at average risk of contracting heart disease, but it doesn't provide even that benefit for everybody. People who are not likely to contract heart disease because they eat a genuinely healthy diet and take a healthy amount of exercise and are not leading an unduly stressful life derive zero health benefit from drinking half a unit of alcohol per day. All it does is to increase the risk of their contracting one of the other diseases that the researchers analysed.

So what is 'moderate drinking'? If it means drinking an amount that won't harm you, then for someone with an average unhealthy lifestyle it might indeed be half a unit of alcohol a day, which is very little indeed. But for someone who enjoys a healthy diet and lifestyle, 'moderation' means that you can drink any normal drink in reasonable quantities so long as it contains no alcohol.

So what about teaching your kids to drink in moderation? Would you teach them to take heroine in moderation? Would you teach them to self-harm in moderation? Should you teach them to drink alcohol in moderation? Only if by 'moderation' you mean the one sensible thing that moderation can logically mean for healthy people who want to remain as healthy as possible – to drink none at all.

Actually an alcohol-free life is not so unusual as one might imagine. In England in 2009, 38% of the adult population drank less than one alcoholic drink a week.<sup>380</sup> 15% did not drink at

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<sup>379</sup> Nichols M et al. *What is the optimal level of population alcohol consumption for chronic disease prevention in England? Modelling the impact of changes in average consumption levels.* BMJ Open, 2012.

<sup>380</sup> *Statistics on Alcohol: England 2011.* NHS Information Centre.

all,<sup>381</sup> and this was an increase of 5% on the 1998 figure, so the proportion of teetotallers in the country is rising.

### **Alcohol and obesity**

One thing I forgot to mention earlier is that there is a link between alcohol and obesity. Alcoholic drinks put weight on for three reasons:

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<sup>381</sup> *Smoking and drinking among adults, 2009*. Office of National Statistics, 2011.