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VITAL SIGNS

Prevention: One Drink a Day Tied to Lower Death Risk

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For people over 55, an alcoholic drink a day reduces the risk of death, a new study has found, but having one drink or less a week is no help at all.

Many studies have found health benefits in moderate alcohol consumption, but the effect has been unclear because people who drink moderately tend to be healthy to begin with.

But this prospective study, in the March issue of The Journal of the American Geriatrics Society, included more than 12,000 people, followed them for four years and controlled for factors including sex, race, smoking, obesity, cancer, heart disease, recent heart attack, angina, physical function and socioeconomic status.

After all these variables were accounted for, moderate alcohol consumption was associated with a 28 percent reduction in the risk for mortality compared with not drinking. But there was no advantage in drinking one drink or less a week, and those who had more than three drinks a day increased their risk by 11 percent.

Dr. Sei J. Lee, the lead author and a geriatrician at the San Francisco Veterans Affairs Medical Center, said that he was not prepared to advise nondrinkers to take up drinking and that the study supported federal guidelines for alcohol consumption. “There are other things you can do that we know are helpful and have a lower chance of harming you, like getting more exercise,” he said.