The Risks of Consuming Alcohol With Atrial Fibrillation

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AFib and Drinking Alcohol

Although moderate drinking has been heralded as a gateway to heart health, that can be a dangerous assumption. In fact, drinking can have a big impact on your risk for atrial fibrillation, and even a moderate amount is enough to cause concern for people who are at risk for heart problems.

Alcohol is currently the most common drug consumed worldwide, and acute alcohol consumption has been linked with heart abnormalities like the so-called "holiday heart syndrome" – atrial fibrillation and other rhythm disturbances caused by alcohol in healthy individuals.

Most recent studies agree that alcohol increases a person's risk of AFib – sometimes by as much as 45%. A lot depends on how much you consume at once, and during the course of a week, with wine and hard alcohol bringing the highest risk; however, research shows that any level of alcohol consumption will tend to increase your risk for AFib rather than lower it.

How Alcohol Interferes with Your Heart Health

Chronic heavy consumption of alcohol is toxic for the heart tissues. It promotes accumulation of fats (especially triglycerides) and increases the risk of heart attacks and strokes. Heavy drinking is also associated with the development of cancers (mouth, larynx, liver, breast, and colorectal), anemia, cirrhosis (permanent damage of the liver), dementia, anemia, depression, gout, high blood pressure, and many more other health problems.

Experts are still unclear about the exact relationship between alcohol and atrial fibrillation, but there are several factors that can encourage negative consequences:

- **Vagal Tone:** Alcohol can interact with the vagal nerve, which runs through the neck. The more alcohol you drink, the more vagal nerve activity (or vagal tone) you experience, and the higher your risk of an AFib episode. For some, one drink is enough to spark an influx in vagal nerve activity.

- **Dehydration:** Alcohol is a major cause of dehydration, and dehydration can put a lot of stress on your heart. A change in fluid levels can impede a variety of organ systems, and that can bring on sudden AFib episodes.
- **Medication:** Certain drugs can interact with alcohol, especially vitamin K antagonists that thin the blood, like warfarin or acenocoumarol. Your risk of bleeding will increase when you drink alcohol if you're on blood-thinning medication, so it's especially important that you stay within the recommended guidelines.

Based on current guidelines, low to moderate alcohol consumption (two doses of alcohol daily) does not usually cause problems in AFib sufferers. One dose (or unit) of alcohol equals one beer, one glass of wine, or 25 mls of distilled spirits. However, heavy consumption should be avoided, and you should have at least two or three days in the week during which you don't drink alcohol at all.

Next page: protecting against AFib complications.

Protect Against AFib Complications

If you suffer from AFib, your doctor will likely suggest you give up alcohol, or cut down dramatically.

If you do decide to imbibe, take a few precautions to protect your body and ward off a more serious health issue:

- **Space out your drinks.** Binge drinking can increase your risk of AFib by up to 60%. Stick to the medical community's recommendations: less than two drinks a day for women, and less than three for men. Also, try to sip slowly to give your body a chance to filter the alcohol.
- **Monitor your blood pressure.** Alcohol increases blood pressure, and that can spell trouble for your heart. If you experience AFib (or are worried about it), buy an inexpensive blood pressure monitor to keep track of your blood pressure at home.
- **Balance electrolytes.** Since alcohol is a diuretic, it encourages your kidneys to draw water from your body. Along with that water, your body loses electrolytes – important minerals like sodium and potassium that keep all of your systems functioning well.
  Electrolytes are vital for proper heart function, so be sure you replace your lost liquids with water, as well as nutritious food and other non-caffeinated drinks.
- **Sleep well.** It's no secret that good sleep does wonders for your overall health, but problems with your sleep can have the very opposite effect.
  Those who suffer from sleep apnea are at higher risk for AFib, and the sedative effect of alcohol can complicate matters. A CPAP machine can help those with apnea breathe more efficiently while they're asleep.

In many cases, an adjustment in alcohol consumption can make a big difference in the frequency of your AFib episodes. What you eat and drink has a direct impact on your heart health, and good choices now can mean a much better quality of life in the years to come.

Other Considerations

Besides keeping an eye on how much alcohol you drink, you should also monitor the consumption of coffee – ideally drink no more than 2-3 cups a day. Adopt a healthy diet and a customized fitness plan (of moderate intensity), avoid stress (both long term stress and sudden, intense stress can lead to new episodes of AFib) and do not smoke.