

Another study to confuse alcohol drinkers

By Rob Stein, Washington Post

Here's some news that might make a lot of women feel as if they need a drink: The compound in red wine suspected of having a host of health benefits has for the first time shown promising test results in people. But a new Harvard study indicates that indulging in as few as three drinks a week may boost a woman's risk for breast cancer.

So, should that be a glass of Merlot? Or just plain water?

Scientists, of course, say: It depends.

"If you are someone with a family history of breast cancer but are healthy, at a good weight, exercise regularly, have a healthy diet and don't have a risk for heart disease, then you may make one decision," said Wendy Y. Chen of the Harvard Medical School. "Another woman who has some cardiovascular risk factors and no history of breast cancer may make a different decision."

The findings, both released Tuesday, are the latest seemingly head-spinning medical advice about alcohol. For years, doctors advised that women could safely consume about a drink a day. Men could get away with two. More servings have long been known to have more risks than benefits, especially for breast cancer among women. Scientists think alcohol can cause breast cancer by raising estrogen levels.

Many experts urged caution about overreacting to the new findings. The slight increased risk for breast cancer from such low alcohol consumption was probably still outweighed for many women by a possible reduction in the risk of heart disease, which kills far more women than breast cancer.

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