Moderate drinking can be good for your brain
By Edward Neafsey
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During the past few decades, extensive research has shown alcohol to be a two-edged sword: Too much is bad. But a little might actually be helpful.

For example, long-term alcohol abuse can cause memory loss and impair cognitive function. But moderate alcohol use appears to have the opposite effect.

My colleague Michael Collins and I recently completed an analysis of 143 studies dating to 1977. These studies included more than 365,000 participants. Our analysis found that moderate drinkers were 23 percent less likely to develop cognitive impairment or Alzheimer’s disease and other forms of dementia.

Wine was more beneficial than beer or spirits. But this particular finding was based on a relatively small number of studies — most papers did not distinguish among different types of alcohol.

Heavy drinking (more than three to five drinks per day) was associated with a higher risk of cognitive impairment and dementia, but this finding was not statistically significant.

We don’t recommend that nondrinkers start drinking. But moderate drinking — if it is truly moderate — can be beneficial. Moderate drinking is defined as a maximum of two drinks per day for men and one drink per day for women.

Here are some of the other things we found in our analysis:

The protective effect of moderate drinking held up after adjusting for age, education, sex and smoking.

There was no difference in the effects of alcohol on men and women.

The beneficial effect of moderate drinking was seen in 14 of 19 countries, including the United States. In three of the remaining five countries, there also was a benefit, but this was not strong enough to be statistically significant.

The findings were similar across different types of studies.

We don’t know exactly why moderate drinking can have a beneficial effect. One possibility is that the well-documented cardiovascular benefits of moderate alcohol consumption, such as raising good HDL cholesterol, also can improve blood flow in the brain and thus brain metabolism.

A second possible explanation involves “sick quitters.” According to this theory, nondrinkers have a higher risk of cognitive impairment and dementia because the group includes former heavy drinkers who damaged their brain cells before quitting. But our analysis did not support
this explanation. We found that, in studies that excluded former heavy drinkers, the protective effect of moderate drinking still held up.

We suggest a third possible explanation: Small amounts of alcohol might, in effect, make brain cells more fit. Alcohol in moderate amounts stresses cells and thus toughens them up to cope with major stresses down the road that could cause dementia.

For people who drink responsibly and in moderation, there may be no health-related incentive to quit. But because of the potential for alcohol to be abused, we do not recommend that abstainers begin drinking.

Moreover, there are other lifestyle factors that can reduce the risk of dementia. These include exercise, education and a Mediterranean diet high in fruits, vegetables, cereals, beans, nuts and seeds. Even gardening has been shown to reduce the risk of dementia.

And despite the possible benefits of moderate alcohol consumption, there are times when people should never drink: During the years of adolescence and months of pregnancy, and before driving.

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