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Wine has a lot of mixed reviews. Headlines state its dangers and praises in equal measure. So what are we to believe? Is wine the good stuff or the bad stuff?“Whether wine is a food, a medicine or a poison depends on the dosage” stated Paracelsus, the controversial Swiss-German philosopher in the 16th century. Centuries later, research is proving him right.

Wine – the poison

Newspaper headlines reveal the horrors of alcoholism and binge drinking; cognitive behavioural therapist Gaylin Tudhope acknowledges the lasting psychological and social effects of excess alcohol intake, including depression, anxiety, paranoia and broken relationships.

There is a known link between alcohol and certain cancers, liver disease and pancreatitis. Drivers, pregnant women and those taking certain medications are advised to limit alcohol intake.

Wine – the medicine

Around 400 BC, Hippocrates, the founder of medicine, was using wine as an antiseptic, a diuretic and a sedative. Louis Pasteur, the French chemist, stated that “wine is the healthiest and most hygienic of drinks”.

Professor Roger Corder, of London’s William Harvey Research Institute says “Wine drinkers are generally healthier and often live longer….wine drinkers have less heart disease and diabetes, and are also less likely to suffer dementia in old age”.

Numerous studies show that drinking wine is better for the heart than not drinking it: One Californian study [5] showed that those who consumed one to two glasses of wine per day experienced less heart disease and heart failure than abstainers. However, heavy drinkers were shown to damage their heart.

Furthermore, the so-called ‘French Paradox’ confirms this observation: a high intake of saturated fat is known to be related to heart disease in many countries apart from France. This is generally ascribed to the high wine consumption in France.

In addition to its heart effects, studies have shown that moderate wine consumption can reduce depression [6] and type 2 diabetes [7]. In both cases caution is advised, however, as excessive alcohol can cause depression and reduce awareness of hypoglycaemia in diabetes.

It’s the polyphenols that protect

Wine contains thousands of naturally occurring chemicals called polyphenols, derived from the pulp, seed and skin of the grape. These are thought to protect the body by improving levels of ‘good cholesterol’ [8] and by improving blood flow throughout the body by opening up blood vessels and reducing its stickiness. They also have slight antioxidant activity.

Proof of a protective function for polyphenols emerged from the French region of Gers: a remarkably high proportion of men live beyond the age of 90 here, and their wine was shown to be remarkably high in polyphenols, owing to a particular ‘Tannat’ variety of grape. Vineyard practices such as slow ripening, long fermentation times and growth at high altitudes all affect polyphenol levels. It’s worth then getting to know which red wines are the best medicine.

Other wines and foods

Red wine has 12-fold higher levels of polyphenols than white wine owing to the removal of the grape seeds and skins before fermentation of white wine. Polyphenols are also found in chocolate [9], apples [10], cranberries, pomegranates, nuts and spices – all our Christmas favourites. A little mulled wine [11] or even a mulled cranberry, apple and pomegranate [12] juice might do you a lot of good this Christmas.

MEDICAL JOURNALISTS' ASSOCIATION

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