# Does moderate drinking prevent heart disease? A meta-analysis and re-estimation of alcohol-caused mortality in Australia

## Researchers

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## Summary

Most long-term studies on drinking alcohol have found that light-drinkers are less likely to die prematurely than abstainers. This study re-assesses the effects of moderate alcohol consumption on health and mortality. The team hypothesised that misclassification of former drinkers and occasional drinkers had introduced consistent errors, affecting the results of previous studies.

This study re-examines 54 all-cause mortality and 35 Coronary Heart Disease mortality studies. Most of these studies committed the consistent and serious error of including as 'abstainers, people who had cut down or ceased drinking alcohol due to declining health, frailty, medication use or disabilitysometimes as the result of past heavy alcohol consumption. When combined in the same group as long-term abstainers or very light drinkers, deaths among these people may have increased the apparent risk of long-term abstinence for the group as a whole.

This study shows that it is possible to perform new analyses on studies that appeared to show a protective effect from light drinking only when they deliberately included the error of combining long-term abstainers with people who had cut down or quit drinking more recently.

## Outcomes

This study concludes that experts should be cautious in recommending light drinking to abstainers, and points out the urgent need for well-designed studies that assess people's alcohol intake and abstinence more precisely as their drinking patterns change over time.

## References

Fillmore, KM, Kerr, WC, Stockwell, T, Chikritzhs, T, & Bostrom, A 2006 Moderate alcohol use and reduced mortality risk: Systematic error in prospective studies. Addiction Research and Theory, vol.14, no.2, April, 101-132. Stockwell, T, Chikritzhs, T, Bostrom, A, Fillmore, KM, Kerr, WC, Rehm, J & Taylor, B 2007 Alcohol-caused mortality in Australia and Canada: Scenario analyses using different assumptions about cardiac benefit. Journal of Studies on Alcohol and Drugs, vol.68, no.3, May, 345-352.