Dear Alice,

How does the use of alcohol damage the liver?

Answer

Dear Reader,

Moderate use of alcohol doesn't do tremendous damage to the liver. In fact, some alcohol, like red wine, can actually be healthy in terms of the antioxidants and phytonutrients it delivers to the body. However, the overuse and abuse of alcohol can have devastating effects to the liver and to the rest of the body as a result.

Chronic heavy drinking can cause the liver to become fatty. Fat deposits in the liver block the liver cells from their blood supply, depriving them of oxygen and other nutrients, eventually killing them. As the name implies, the liver performs so many vital functions that we cannot live without it. The liver filters all of the blood in our bodies, breaking down and eliminating toxins, converting excess blood sugar to glycogen, and many other crucial functions. When liver cells die from lack of fresh blood, they are replaced with scar tissue, which can't perform the functions of a liver cell—a condition is called cirrhosis.

Cirrhosis, the main liver affliction of many alcohol abusers, results in a multitude of health problems as well as reduced ability to tolerate alcohol. Genetic make-up can play a big role in a drinker's susceptibility to this condition. For instance, some alcohol users develop symptoms of cirrhosis after just a few years of consuming 3 to 4 drinks a day, while other heavy drinkers never suffer from this potential killer. Warning signs of cirrhosis include jaundice (yellowing of the skin and the whites of the eyes), fatigue, and a swelling of the abdomen and lower extremities.

The Mayo Clinic [2] publishes important facts about alcohol related diseases like hepatitis [3] and cirrhosis [4]. If you, or someone you know, have a history of either alcoholism or cirrhosis in your family, it may be a good idea to limit your drinking to one or two drinks per day, if at all. Most studies say that moderate use of alcohol does not appear to produce any health-related challenges. Keep in mind that moderate use is defined as 1 to 2 drinks per day, 1 to 2 days per week.

Staying well-informed about the effects of certain substances on the body is a great way to keep healthy and safe. May all your choices about alcohol be good ones, and may your liver
stay healthy and strong.

Alice!
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