The Link Between Alcohol Use and Liver Cancer

by LANA BARHUM

Alcohol and Liver Cancer

You may know heavy drinking leads to health problems. What you may not know, however, is that heavy alcohol consumption increases your risk for certain cancers.

In fact, alcohol accounts for up to four percent of cancer deaths in the United States according to the National Cancer Institute in Bethesda, Maryland. One international study from the World Cancer Research Fund finds that just three alcohol beverages a day can cause liver cancer.

Alcohol Consumption and Your Liver

In 1998, the International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC) confirmed alcohol was a carcinogen. A carcinogen is any substance that can cause cancer in living tissues.

Heavy alcohol use damages the liver and causes inflammation. That inflammation puts your liver at a higher risk for liver cancer.

Cirrhosis of the liver is also the result of heavy alcohol consumption. Cirrhosis results when scar tissues forms and adds up. The building up of scar tissue eventually stops the liver from functioning. Symptoms of cirrhosis include weakness, easy bruising, jaundice (yellowing of the skin), fatigue, itching, and lack of appetite.

At least five percent of people with cirrhosis will develop liver cancer and up to 90 percent with liver cancer also have cirrhosis, according to the Cancer Treatment Centers of America.

Alcoholic fatty liver disease is another consequence of heavy alcohol consumption. Fatty liver can be reversed in its early stages, but if you continue to drink heavily, it will turn into alcoholic hepatitis or liver inflammation caused by drinking.

Many heavy drinkers have fatty liver and up to 35 percent develop alcoholic hepatitis, according to the American Liver Foundation. And by having either of these conditions, you are at a much higher risk of developing liver cancer.

How Much Alcohol is Too Much?

You may wonder how alcohol is too much or if there is an amount you can safely consume. Unfortunately, researchers are yet to answer that question.

Research has confirmed that heavy consumption increases cancer risk, but they know very little about the link between moderate alcohol use and cancer risk.

Breast cancer research indicates that even a light alcohol consumption may contribute to breast cancer. Research confirms the more women drink, the higher risk they have of developing breast cancer.

As for other cancers, including liver cancer, the risk to those who drink lightly and moderately is unclear. Despite the lack of research, less is always better.

Does the Type of Alcohol Matter?

There has been some research to indicate certain beverage types may be to blame for increased cancer risk but many of these associations have been disputed. In fact, research seems to indicate that ethanol (the kind of alcohol found in alcoholic beverages) is the actual culprit for the increased risk and not a specific type of alcoholic beverage.

If some research links one type of alcohol over another, it is because people prefer one type of alcohol consistently. And that link may have more to do with lifestyle than anything else.

For example, wine drinkers tend to get better medical care and are more affluent. They are more often diagnosed with melanoma because they also spend a lot of time the sun and on vacation and this may contribute to their increased risk.

The wine and lifestyle comparison comes from a study done by Kaiser Permanente linking lifestyle, alcohol consumption, and cancer risk.

Should You Stop Drinking if You Have Liver Cancer?

It is never too late to quit drinking. Even if you already have liver cancer, alcohol is still toxic and may speed up liver damage.

It is possible a continuation of alcohol consumption with liver cancer may have fatal consequences. Moreover, your treatments may not work as well if you continue drinking.

And if you need a liver transplant, you may not be eligible unless you commit to not drinking alcohol. It also is possible you may not qualify for clinical trials if there is concern that your liver function will worsen due to alcohol use.

If you cannot stop drinking, you should reach out to your cancer doctor, your hospital's dependency program, and/or loved ones for help in becoming alcohol-free.

Preventing Liver Cancer

The best lifestyle change you can make to reduce your liver cancer risk is drinking moderately. You also shouldn’t drink daily and if you are diagnosed with any alcohol-induced liver diseases, you should stop drinking alcohol completely.

In addition to decreasing your alcohol consumption, you should make healthy nutrition choices and stay active to better manage your overall health. Both changes will further decrease your cancer risk.