What You Should Know About Rheumatoid Arthritis and Alcohol Consumption

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Rheumatoid Arthritis and Alcohol Consumption

While there are a handful of non-modifiable risk factors for rheumatoid arthritis, such as your age and your genetics, the list of modifiable risk factors is surprisingly long. From your diet to your occupation to habits like smoking, many of your daily activities and actions play a role in your arthritis risks, pain management, joint mobility, and general well-being and happiness.

Alcohol is one such lifestyle factor. Whether you enjoy a James Bond-style martini or a simple glass of Merlot, knowing how alcohol affects your rheumatoid arthritis, and how much you can enjoy safely, is essential for your journey towards total joint health.

How Alcohol Impacts Your Arthritis

Rheumatoid arthritis is an autoimmune disease where your immune system actively and incorrectly attacks your joints. This immune system barrage sparks inflammation within the lining of your joints, leading to stiffness, loss of mobility, chronic pain and in more severe cases, permanent damage to your joints.

Thus, the big question with alcohol is how alcohol impacts inflammation, and therefore your arthritis; the answer may surprise you.

A Study on Rheumatoid Arthritis and Alcohol Consumption

While alcohol is often painted as a villain within many health communities, a handful of studies say it may not be as bad as you may think when it comes to arthritis. In fact, alcohol may have a surprisingly positive impact on arthritis!

In one comprehensive study published in the journal *Rheumatology*, researchers studied 873 patients with rheumatoid arthritis and 1,004 healthy people without arthritis. “Although there are some limitations to this study, our data suggest that alcohol consumption has an inverse and dose-related association with both risk and severity of RA”, concluded the researchers.

To put it in simpler language, the study found that drinking alcohol decreased both your risk of having rheumatoid arthritis, as well as the severity of your arthritis if you have it.

A team of researchers at Brigham and Women’s Hospital looked into it further. Specifically, the researchers looked at examining how drinking alcohol affected women and their arthritis. The study discovered that drinking a moderate amount of beer (wine and other forms of alcohol weren’t included) had a positive effect on their rheumatoid arthritis.

"Long-term, moderate alcohol drinking may reduce future rheumatoid arthritis development," explains principal investigator Bing Lu, in a press release from the hospital. "The study found that moderate use of any form of alcohol reduced the risk by 21 percent, but moderate beer drinking – between two and four per week – cut women's odds by nearly a third."

Alcohol's positive effects on arthritis may be due to its ability to reduce some of your chronic inflammation, which ties into both arthritis risks and arthritis severity.

Moderation Is Key When It Comes to Rheumatoid Arthritis and Alcohol Consumption

While multiple studies have indicated that there may be some positive benefits to drinking alcohol if you have rheumatoid arthritis or want to lower your risks of arthritis, this isn't an invitation to go on a bender or polish off a bottle of red every evening.

Researchers warn that moderation is key, and moderation may not look exactly like what you're thinking. According to the Arthritis Foundation, moderation in one study was 5 to 10 grams of alcohol a day, which translates to less than a glass of wine or a pint of beer a day.

The Dangers of Rheumatoid Arthritis and Alcohol Consumption

Drinking more than this negates many of the benefits of alcohol.

Clouding the picture, even more, is the risk of side effects with common medications used to treat arthritis and arthritic pain.

"Once you already have arthritis, drinking may have more downsides than pluses," warns the Arthritis Foundation. "Many of the medicines your doctor prescribes to relieve sore joints don't mix well with alcohol – including nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) such as ibuprofen (Motrin) or naproxen (Aleve), which carry a greater risk for stomach bleeding and ulcers when you drink. Taken with acetaminophen, methotrexate or leflunomide (Arava), alcohol can make you more susceptible to liver damage."

Finally, alcohol can affect other conditions that men and women with arthritis have. For example, many people with arthritis also struggle with gout, and alcohol can cause gout to flare up and worsen.

The Bottom Line...

The final verdict? Is alcohol something to cheers over, or something that someone with arthritis should absolutely avoid?

Studies suggest that small servings of beer or wine (other forms of alcohol are less studied) may have more pros than cons when it comes to rheumatoid arthritis, but that's not the only thing to consider.

Because alcohol isn't benign and comes with other risks and benefits, it's important to talk to your doctor. While drinking a tiny amount of wine or beer may have beneficial impacts on your arthritis, you also want to take into account factors like any medications you have and other pre-existing conditions you're experiencing. Only a complete review by a medical professional can guide you towards the right decision.