

Transcript

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Katie Caviness-Crolley 0:03

Welcome to Medicine Made General, a podcast for patients brought to you by the Johns Hopkins Division of General Internal Medicine. I'm Katie Caviness-Crolley and I'm here with my co-host, Doctor Bimal Ashar.



Bimal Ashar 0:53

Thank you, Katie, and happy holidays. We're excited today to have Doctor Aliyah Bodnar. She is an assistant professor of medicine and she's a primary care doctor, internal medicine doctor, and she's board-certified in internal medicine, but also board-certified in addiction medicine.

And that's why we have her here today.

Aliyah, welcome.



Alia Bodnar 1:18

Thank you so much for having me.



Katie Caviness-Crolley 1:20

Yeah, it's great to have you. Thank you so much. We really appreciate you taking the time to do this, especially with the holidays in full swing. You know, we thought it'd be appropriate time to discuss alcohol. I mean, love it, hate it if you're indifferent to it. The holidays are definitely a time when people drink significantly more than other times of the year. So with the advice on quote UN quote, how much alcohol is OK, it seems genuinely confusing right now with US dietary guidelines still saying that moderation is up to one drink per.

Per day for women and two for men. Is that level of alcohol intake still thought to be safe?



Alia Bodnar 0:42

And I love this question because you're right, this does cause people a lot of confusion, both within, honestly, the medical community and the medical literature, as well as when people are thinking about their own alcohol consumption. The guidelines suggest a limit of one drink per day for women.

And two drinks per day for men. And the reason that those guidelines are in place is because those are the levels at which we start to see significant health issues increase, right. I'm a primary care doctor. I'm a physician. I think about all of this from a health and safety standpoint and there is a lot that goes into.

You know how people make decisions about their health. But my role is really to explain to people what we think the risks are. And so when we think about what is safe alcohol consumption versus unsafe alcohol consumption.

What I tell my patients is less is better, none is best. But we really start to see increases in some of the health complications of alcohol when with higher consumption. And so that's where those limits come from.



Alia Bodnar 1:52

A lot of the confusion also comes from some of what we used to think we understood about the relationship between mortality and alcohol consumption.

When you look at mortality rates and alcohol consumption, you see a little bit of AJ shaped curve, which means that amongst people who consume no.

Alcohol mortality is slightly higher, meaning the number of, you know, the number of deaths amongst that group is slightly higher than it is for people who drink a little bit of alcohol. And then you start to see a steady increase with higher levels of alcohol consumption and mortality.

And we used to interpret that data as meaning that low levels of alcohol consumption actually conferred some health benefit or or some benefit on mortality.

A couple of years ago, some folks really drilled into the data and looked at it and found that in fact there is a group amongst the people who consume no alcohol.

Who do so because they have other health issues and so mortality is actually higher because they because they had other reasons that that their health was not as good and so the reason that they weren't drinking alcohol.

Was related to other health issues, and so when we correct for that, we see less is better, not as best.



Bimal Ashar 3:13

That's actually very helpful and fascinating, you know, and I, I don't know. I mean, I've been around for a while here and you know, we've gone through kind of cycles of of different recommendations regarding alcohol. And you know, at one point and I still have patients who say, well, I've been told that, you know, drinking a little bit of.

Wine is really good for me and I should do that. And that's why I drink. And you know, there are, I'm sure, a lot of myths out there, Alia, and I wonder whether you have any.

BA **Bimal Ashar** 3:49

What do you think the biggest myths about alcohol and health are? And I can tell you today I saw a patient who said to me, yeah, I drank X number of drinks per week, but I I don't drink hard liquor. And like that was better than, you know, the, you know, 21 drinks of of beer and wine that they have a week.

BA **Bimal Ashar** 4:08

So I wonder if there there's some recommendation you have regarding what what misconceptions are out there.

 **Alia Bodnar** 4:15

Yeah, that's a great question as well because a lot of the misconceptions that people have like that people have internalized do have to do with the shifts in our understanding of alcohol and health and mortality rate that and then also some of the.

Conflicts within the evidence as well, right? Like when we look at medical studies that some medical studies may suggest that there are some benefits, you know, some benefits, but when you look at.

Overall risk. So if we kind of break things down into thinking about alcohol as it relates to heart health versus alcohol as it relates to cancer risks versus alcohol as it relates to, you know, other factors like high blood pressure, right? And you look at the net risks.

And what we think about possible net benefits, definitely things skew to alcohol contributing to health risks, if that makes sense. And so I think that that causes quite a bit of confusion and contributes to the myth of, you know, the myth of alcohol being potentially healthy in.

Certain situations. And to be clear, the American Heart Association specifically states that it does not promote any alcohol consumption for cardiac health, even though that is something that has been thought of in the past. And when you look at the evidence that may suggest certain benefits, a lot of those studies are observational. So the quality of the data is not that good.



Alia Bodnar 5:50

And then to your other question about is, you know, is some alcohol safer than others? Alcohol is alcohol. A standard drink has about 14 grams of alcohol in it, which, you know, isn't a super meaningful number. But that is to say, when we think about what a drink is, it's a set amount.

Of alcohol and then one standard drink of beer is going to be different than one standard drink of wine or one standard drink of a liquor. And it depends on what percentage of what percentage of.

The drink is actually alcohol and and.

We suggest a serving based on the amount of alcohol that you'll end up consuming. So for example, a 12 ounce beer is equivalent to a 5 ounce glass of wine that's 12% alcohol is equivalent to about an ounce and a half or 50 milliliters of.

Liquor that is 40% alcohol. So one is not better than the other. Your body sees that alcohol in the same way. The only caveat there I think would be that if somebody has other health issues, right? So if somebody has diabetes, then we want to think about the other things that might be in the alcohol rate that.

If you are drinking something that's mixed in juice, like has a lot of sugar in it, then there may be potentially other health risks associated with it. And then the other place where we want to be really thoughtful is just the volume as well, that if somebody is more likely to consume a higher volume of alcohol that has a higher. Percentage of alcohol in it, then we just want to be cognizant of that. And mostly it's about understanding the content of the alcohol that you're drinking.



Katie Caviness-Crolley 7:41

OK, so our bodies don't differentiate between beer, wine, liquor. You know, many people make a point to say that they don't drink every day, and that equates to not having any problems with alcohol. True or false? Maybe a little bit both. I mean, what are you? What are you thinking?



Alia Bodnar 7:57

Yeah, and so.

We did so false. But I think the most important point there is thinking about like, what does that mean to you, right? Like, what does it mean to think about having a problem with alcohol? Does that mean that the alcohol consumption has minimal or

no risk to your health, or does that mean that?

The alcohol consumption is not disrupting your life in other ways. When we think about what is risky drinking, risky drinking is consumption over those recommended limits, right? Or can also be consumption in other unsafe settings. So consumption while.

Operating heavy machinery or driving for people who are pregnant, any consumption is considered risky. For children, any consumption is considered risky, right? And so all of that has the potential to have negative impacts on our health versus.

An alcohol use disorder, right? Which is how many people think of, which is what many people think of when they think of like problematic drinking, right? Which is different from risky. There's overlap, right? And there may be overlap between risky drinking and an alcohol use disorder, but that's really defined more.

As a pattern of maladaptive alcohol consumption that's having negative impacts on somebody's life. And if you really want to drill down down into it, it is a diagnosis that is of lives in the.

Manual that our psychiatrists use to diagnose things and has a really clear set of criteria. So that's much more of a medical diagnosis or a psychiatric diagnosis.

 **Bimal Ashar** 9:45

That's great. You know, I, I, you know, I want to go back a little bit. So you mentioned about you know the the what one standard drink is will depend upon the alcohol content and you know.

I wonder whether you have any, like when you talk to somebody about that and they say, oh, I have just a couple of drinks or I just have one drink. I mean, do you go into specifically asking them?

To to really lay it out on the line and well, tell me what what one drink is. Well, you know, what's a pour for you, right? Do you do you do that routinely?

 **Alia Bodnar** 10:25

Yeah, I absolutely. And I think it's really helpful both to have that information and I think it's also helpful to explain to folks when like in the context of a medical visit, why I'm asking those questions and to make sure because I think you know.

Sometimes they're like sometimes folks may have either internalized stigma or as a society. Sometimes we like we think certain things or or have some stigmatized ideas

about higher volumes of alcohol consumption in like in a medical visit. I want to be really clear that the reason that I'm asking.

These questions is because I'm thinking about them in terms of somebody's health and safety, and it's really helpful for me to know specifically how much somebody is drinking because that really will inform health and then I can share information with them that they can use to make.

Decisions in keeping with their own health goals. And so it is really helpful for me to know if somebody is consuming a beer, is that truly a 5% beer? Like what kind of beer are they drinking? Does it have a higher alcohol content if somebody is drinking?

You know, wine or drinking liquor? Um.

It's helpful to know kind of more on the order of like how many bottles might they go through in a week or in a night, because what is defined as a serving of alcohol may not necessarily be what somebody understands to be a serving of alcohol. Like we as medical providers get a lot of information about.

you know about what a standard drink is, but that's not always readily available to, you know, to just a general consumer of alcohol. And so that's helpful information for me as a doctor to share.



Katie Caviness-Crolley 12:13

So with at the time of this recording, it's the holidays now, and I think I speak for most people when I say the holidays are stressful and a lot of people do drink to relax or use it as a coping mechanism to deal with holiday stress.

What should people know about using alcohol as a stress reliever?



Alia Bodnar 14:18

So when we think about the stress-relieving properties of alcohol, I think it's helpful to think about why we get those effects and why people may experience that when they consume alcohol, and then also to understand kind of what some of the downstream effects are.

Or what people may feel later to get a little bit scientific. The reason that alcohol tends to make people feel a little bit more calm, or may even make people feel sleepy, is because it interacts with a neurotransmitter called GABA, which we think about as an inhibitory neurotransmitter.

Some of its effects are calming and sedation, but when those effects wear off, which

can happen as alcohol is metabolized, as alcohol leaves the body, we'll see some of the stress associated neurochemicals starts to become.

More active and so people may experience a calming effect initially, but kind of as the effects we wear off, may feel a little bit more anxious later. If folks are drinking right before going to bed, they may find that they wake up overnight or in the morning they wake up feeling very anxious.



Alia Bodnar 15:34

The other thing that we want to keep in mind with alcohol is a stress reliever both is the, you know, it's not durable, right? So it's not going to make people feel better in a durable way, but also that you might experience some other health effects with it as well and certainly with other.

With higher consumption of alcohol may have some other negative effects and feel poorly the next day as well, which can contribute to stress.



Bimal Ashar 16:02

You know one of the one of the things that that we I learned early on in in medical school and one of the things we hear about is something called a holiday heart and and I wonder whether you can tell us what holiday heart is and also maybe extend that out just to say you know.

When people think about the harms of alcohol, other than potentially addiction and drinking too many, but what effects does it have on the body that are negative for the long term?



Alia Bodnar 16:33

And so Holiday Heart specifically refers to some of the arrhythmias or abnormal rhythms in the heart that can happen after consumption of alcohol and particularly higher volumes of alcohol consumption.



Alia Bodnar 16:51

We it happens because again like some of the some of the balances of some of those neurochemicals get a little bit out of whack and as we see some of the fight or flight neurochemicals surge and then wane.

Some of the electrical activity in the heart uh can um.

Can start to act in ways that that it doesn't normally. One of the arrhythmias that

we'll commonly see is atrial fibrillation, which can happen in response to can happen in response to higher volumes of alcohol consumption. And so that's when we're referring to holiday heart.

That's what we're talking about, you know, and it that is more likely to happen in folks who have other risk factors. But it can happen in folks who have never had arrhythmias before or may not know that they're at risk and so.

It's certainly something that we want to keep in mind. And when we think just in general about the health effects of alcohol, you know, we think about both the immediate health effects of alcohol, like the risks associated with alcohol consumption and intoxication.

But then we also think about some of the long-term effects as well more immediately, right. We think about risks that may be as that are certainly modifiable, right, like risks of driving under the influence or more immediate risks to existing health issues, right, like if somebody has liver disease.

And consumes alcohol that they may be at risk of a decompensation if somebody has existing heart disease or heart failure and consumes alcohol may be at risk of decompensation. But then also just longer term when we're thinking about health risks, we think about.

You know, like in terms of cardiovascular health, things like high blood pressure, there are quite a few malignancies that we know are linked to alcohol consumption, even at lower volumes. And so sort of keep all of that in mind.



Katie Caviness-Crolley 18:57

Thank you for that explanation and Bimal, thank you for your question. I, as a non-physician, had not heard of Holiday Heart before. So as someone who drinks from time to time, thank you for letting me know. I know we've asked you several questions and I I'm almost out of questions, but I did want to ask you know.



Katie Caviness-Crolley 19:15

In terms of safety, especially for our listeners who are tuning in, you know, what are some early signs that someone might be drinking more than they realize or more than is safe?



Alia Bodnar 19:26

Um, and I think it depends a little bit on.

On whose perspective we're referring to, right? So if we're talking about our own personal perspective, if we're examining our own alcohol consumption and thinking about is it safe, is it unsafe? Some of the signs that maybe it is getting a little bit ahead of us can be things like, you know.

Having an episode of alcohol consumption or being out for a night consuming alcohol and then thinking like, oh man, I drank more than I wanted to. That really wasn't what I planned for. Or waking up the next day and saying, oh, I felt pretty bad. Like I probably, I probably shouldn't have had as much.

As much as they did. Or, you know, if you're going out for the night and saying like, OK, I'm just going to have one and then you find that you end up having much more than you plan to, right? So from from an individual's perspective.

Those can be signs, right? If you're thinking about a loved one or like for us as doctors, as we, you know, as we think about our patients, right, it's also helpful to sort of think about how somebody's life is maybe being impacted if we're seeing that there are things that they used to injury doing that they're.

They're not doing anymore if we are seeing that perhaps that they're not feeling as well or we're seeing other health issues associated. Those are all certainly signs that that alcohol consumption is becoming unsafe and we would want to think about addressing that for sure.

BA **Bimal Ashar** 20:58

So, so I'm assuming that that's what you consider kind of the red flags that that people should be looking for when and say, hey, maybe it's time that I seek care with either my primary care physician or somebody else. Is there anything else that you think people should keep in mind like when they need to really discuss?

With their providers about about discuss their alcohol intake with their providers.

 **Alia Bodnar** 21:24

Well, and I would say just like as a general recommendation, it's a good idea at your like annual Wellness visit, at your preventative health visit to be talking about your health habits in general, including alcohol consumption with your provider regardless of level of concern. And that is certainly like that's on us is the.

Primary care providers, right? To make sure that we make time for that. But it's a good idea for, you know, for individuals also just to think about health habits and and to talk to their doctor about, you know about that in general.

If you know, and then when folks are wondering, right, like what you know, what impacts alcohol may have on their health specific to, you know, and it can be specific to like other health, other health conditions that they have. but may also be related to like symptoms that they're having, right?



Katie Caviness-Crolley 22:24

So in terms of someone has a problem with alcohol, wants help cutting back or stopping, what kinds of support and treatments, for a lack of a better phrase, what kind of support and treatments actually work?



Alia Bodnar 22:41

So there are lots of different, lots of different treatment and just as a first pass, one thing that we know is that just having a conversation with your doctor or that if your doctor is talking to you about alcohol, recommending specific.

Limits and explaining some of the basis for that that helps people cut down and that also helps people to identify their goals. So just like a brief screening is recommended by the US Preventative Services Task Force, which for folks listening is. One of the one of the bodies that helps us as doctors decide what's important in terms of preventative health and brief screening for alcohol is recommended. So just having that conversation makes a difference. And then if you know you have a discussion with your doctor, you know recognize that there.

Is, you know that there is a degree of disordered use, right? That it is having a negative impact on your health and that it does feel like it's something that you need additional treatment for. There are both medicines that can help with cutting back on alcohol or stopping alcohol altogether.

And then there are also some behavioral interventions as well, whether it is talking to a therapist who has specific expertise in cutting back on alcohol or participating in a formal treatment program. The other thing that is really important when somebody is getting ready to cut down and this is something.



Alia Bodnar 24:17

to like certainly consider with your doctor is whether there is a risk of withdrawal, because alcohol withdrawal can actually be really dangerous and potentially deadly. And so, you know, that's something that, again, we as physicians need to consider when we're supporting somebody to stop drinking.

And if there is a risk of withdrawal there, we want to think about how we're going to respond to that and whether that's something that needs to be done in a supervised setting as well. Although those are very specific cases and and doesn't apply to everybody, but we sort of want to think about all potential levels.

 **Bimal Ashar** 24:57

Oh, that's that's incredibly important. And Alia, if if as we wrap up here, if you were for our listeners, if they wanted to remember just one thing about kind of alcohol and from our conversation, what would that be?

 **Alia Bodnar** 25:16

You know, I think that I have shared a lot of information about the risks of alcohol consumption and all of the things that we think about from a health and safety standpoint. But when I talk to my patients about this, I do emphasize less is better, none is best from a purely health and safety standpoint, but.

I also tell people it's really important to think about this in the context of your own health goals and you know how how you want to think about this in terms of your overall health, that I don't want people to think that just because they're having one drink a night that they are doing terrible things.

For their body, right? And it's and it's all about finding balance, understanding what you know, what the risks are, and and then using that information to make informed decisions.

 **Bimal Ashar** 26:09

Thank you so much, Aliyah. This has been great and I want to thank everyone for listening and I want to wish everyone a very happy holiday season.

 **Katie Caviness-Crolley** 26:19

Thank you. This has been Medicine Made General from GIM at Johns Hopkins. Thank you for tuning in. We hope you found this conversation helpful. Until next time, stay informed, stay healthy, and happy holidays.