



THYROID CANCER

Moderate alcohol use may be associated with lower risk of thyroid cancer

BACKGROUND

The number of cases of thyroid cancer has been increasing. The reasons for this increase is unclear. The known risks for getting this cancer include a family history of thyroid cancer and previous exposure to head and neck area radiation. However, most patients have neither of these risk factors. Interestingly, some preliminary studies have shown a lower risk of this cancer in individuals with moderate alcohol use, suggesting that alcohol may offer a protective effort on thyroid cancer. This study was done to see whether alcohol use is associated with a lower risk of thyroid cancer as had been shown in some previous studies.

THE FULL ARTICLE TITLE

Sen A et al . Baseline and lifetime alcohol consumption and risk of differentiated thyroid carcinoma in the EPIC study. Br J Cancer 2015;113:840-7. Epub August 27, 2015.

SUMMARY OF THE STUDY

This study was done in Europe at 23 centers. It was done over 18 years (1992 to 2010) and had nearly 500,000 participants. Data was collected and reviewed regarding alcohol use, health, educational level and thyroid cancer diagnosed during the study period. Average lifetime alcohol intake was calculated using weighted averages of intakes at each age. Baseline and average lifetime alcohol consumption were categorized as 0, 0.1 to 4.9 grams, 5 to 14.9 grams and ≥ 15 grams daily, with consumption of 0.1 to 4.9 grams/day used as the reference group. A small glass of wine or a can of beer contains about 10 grams of alcohol. The majority (70%) of the study participants were women.

Alcohol consumers were more likely to have smoked. They also had higher education levels and were more physically active. Participants who had used more than 15 grams of alcohol every day were found to have a lower risk for thyroid cancer. Overall, wine consumption on average of 10 grams every day was associated with a lower cancer risk. Similar trend was, however, not seen with beer or distilled spirits.

WHAT ARE THE IMPLICATIONS OF THIS STUDY?

The study concluded that moderate alcohol use (1–2 glasses of wine daily) may be associated with a lower risk for thyroid cancer. A similar effect was not seen with beer or distilled spirits. The cause of this association is not known. Importantly, other known risk factors were not studied, so this protective effect may not be solely due to alcohol use. Further, it is important to note that alcohol consumption has been linked to a higher risk for many other cancers such as head and neck, breast and colon cancer. Further studies are needed to better understand whether the observed protective effect of moderate alcohol consumption in thyroid cancer risk is real and, if so, why.

—Vibhavasu Sharma, MD

ATA THYROID BROCHURE LINKS

Thyroid cancer: <http://www.thyroid.org/thyroid-cancer/>

ABBREVIATIONS & DEFINITIONS

Alcohol consumption: a small glass of wine or a can of beer contains about 10 grams of alcohol.