

# Why Even 'Moderate' Drinking Is Harming Your Health

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## STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- › Moderate alcohol consumption, once thought to be harmless or even beneficial, is now recognized as detrimental to health, with no safe level of alcohol consumption
- › Alcohol negatively impacts multiple bodily systems, including mitochondrial function, gut health, hormone balance and nutrient levels. It significantly increases cancer risk, contributing to 1 in 3 cancers
- › The alcohol industry's "moderation" guidelines are misleading. If Americans followed these, alcohol sales would drop by 70% to 80%. Overconsumption is widespread
- › A growing "sober curious" movement recognizes the benefits of reducing or eliminating alcohol consumption. About 41% of Americans are currently looking to quit or cut back
- › Strategies for reducing alcohol intake include education, community support, addressing root causes, nutritional support and reframing your relationship with alcohol as a positive health choice

I've had many eye-opening moments that have shifted my understanding of what truly contributes to wellness and longevity. Recently, I had one such revelation about a substance many take for granted as being relatively harmless, or even beneficial, in moderation: alcohol.

I interviewed Dr. Brooke Scheller, a doctor of clinical nutrition, founder of Functional Sobriety (a nutrition-based program for alcohol reduction) and author of "How to Eat to

Change How You Drink," who has done extensive research on the health impacts of alcohol consumption.

We discuss how misguided and dangerous the common beliefs around "moderate" drinking really are. I'm compelled to share these insights with you, as I believe this information could be transformative for your health.

## **The Myth of 'Healthy' Moderate Drinking**

Many believe that having a glass of wine with dinner or a cocktail to unwind is not only acceptable but even good for health. Red wine has been touted for its antioxidants, and studies have suggested moderate drinkers live longer than both heavy drinkers and teetotalers. Scheller and I discussed how deeply flawed and misleading this research is:<sup>1</sup>

*"There's now more studies, larger body studies that are showing that the small amounts, the 'moderate' amount of alcohol that we previously thought was providing some benefit, we're looking at those studies now and saying those were flawed studies.*

*The control group of folks that they were using who were non-drinkers were either non-drinkers because they previously had an alcohol issue or they were non-drinkers because they already had preexisting health conditions like cardiovascular disease."*

In reality, there is no safe level of alcohol consumption when it comes to your health. Every drink causes damage to your body on a cellular level. As Scheller emphasized:<sup>2</sup>

*"My perspective is that no amount of alcohol is the safest, and I think that even one drink per day is having an effect on your health. And if you are someone who is diabetic, pre-diabetic, you have cancer, increased risk for cancer, if you have an autoimmune condition, if you have hormone imbalances, GI issues, that one drink is affecting those symptoms.*

*I do think that even at the lowest amounts that you could be consuming it, if you are looking to optimize health, the answer is none."*

## The Widespread Impact of Alcohol on Health

**Alcohol's negative effects** are pervasive throughout the body. Beyond liver damage and the risks of intoxication, alcohol:

Impairs mitochondrial function,<sup>3</sup>  
accelerating aging

Disrupts your gut microbiome<sup>4</sup>

Depletes crucial nutrients

Impacts hormones like leptin and ghrelin

Increases cancer risk dramatically<sup>5</sup>

Contributes to insulin resistance and  
metabolic dysfunction<sup>6</sup>

Exacerbates anxiety and depression

Scheller pointed out that alcohol plays a much bigger role in many chronic health conditions than many currently recognize:<sup>7</sup>

*"I think that alcohol consumption is playing a much larger role in societal health concerns than we are really able to understand right now. And some of that is under-reporting and people, again, not really recognizing how much alcohol maybe they're having, doctors maybe not asking their patients how much alcohol they're consuming."*

One of the most alarming statistics Scheller shared is that alcohol may contribute to 1 in 3 cancers – and she believes this estimate could even be low:<sup>8</sup>

*"I agree that I think that number might actually be higher, that it might be more than 1 in 3. Again, depending on how much people are consuming this ... We know that alcohol is linked to cancers where there's direct impact of alcohol, so*

*mouth, throat, esophageal, colon cancer, but also hormone-specific cancers like breast cancer."*

This cancer risk exists even at low levels of consumption, again highlighting that there is no "safe" amount when it comes to [alcohol and cancer risk](#).

## **How Alcohol Damages Your Body**

To understand why alcohol is so harmful, you need to look at what happens in your body when you drink.

Processing alcohol uses a lot of energy. This can deplete vital nutrients and cofactors. This energetic demand places significant strain on your body's resources, impacting your health. Also, this process creates harmful byproducts. One is acetaldehyde, a toxic compound that can damage cells. This not only affects the cells directly but also has broader implications for the body's physiological balance.

The disruption affects the endocrine system. It can imbalance hormones and blood sugar levels. These imbalances can cause mood swings and energy spikes and crashes. They can also lead to long-term health issues like diabetes and thyroid dysfunction. Furthermore, your liver, which plays a critical role in detoxifying harmful substances, can become impaired.

When your liver is overwhelmed, its efficiency in processing other toxins diminishes, which can lead to an accumulation of toxins in the body.

Moreover, the impact extends to your gastrointestinal tract. The damage to your gut lining and the disrupted microbiome harm digestive health and immune function. The microbiome is the complex community of microorganisms in the digestive system. It can cause digestive issues, infections, and long-term health problems. The effects of processing challenging substances highlight the need for mindful consumption. We also need good nutrition to stay healthy.

Further, alcohol produces similar damaging compounds to excessive omega-6 fats, like **linoleic acid**. When they're metabolized, they turn into something called OXLAMs, which is oxidized linoleic metabolites. And what's consistent with all of those molecules is they're reactive aldehydes.

Alcohol turns into a reactive aldehyde, which is called acid aldehyde, and these reactive aldehydes wreak havoc throughout your body, damaging mitochondria and accelerating aging at a cellular level.

## **The Unrecognized Epidemic of Alcohol Overconsumption**

Problematic drinking is also prevalent in our society. Scheller shared some startling statistics:<sup>9</sup>

*"If alcohol was consumed in moderation – like the alcohol industry puts that little disclaimer on the bottle – if every American did only consume that one or two drinks per day, alcohol sales would be cut by something like 70% to 80%. That means we are purchasing much more alcohol than we need for everyone to have that one or two drinks per day."*

She also noted that during the pandemic, women's alcohol intake increased by a staggering 41%.<sup>10</sup> Clearly, our cultural norms around drinking are leading to widespread overconsumption, even among those who don't consider themselves to have a "drinking problem." Fortunately, Scheller sees a cultural shift beginning to take place:<sup>11</sup>

*"We're at a pretty pivotal moment societally with alcohol. Over the last couple of years post-pandemic, we're seeing that there was a huge surge in alcohol intake during the pandemic ... But post-pandemic, we're seeing this huge trend toward sober curiosity, people who are looking to cut back and to limit their intake."*

She cited that about 41% of Americans are currently looking to quit drinking or cut back. This growing "sober curious" movement recognizes that you don't need to hit rock bottom or label yourself an alcoholic to decide that drinking less (or not at all) could improve your life.

## Scheller's Personal Journey to Sobriety

Scheller shared her own powerful story of transitioning to an alcohol-free lifestyle, which may serve as motivation for others looking to become sober:<sup>12</sup>

*"I didn't have a rock bottom transition like you might see in a movie. I didn't get a DUI. I didn't lose a job. I didn't have anything blow up in my life, but I was experiencing massive amounts of anxiety and mental health concerns that were really heavily being affected by my alcohol consumption."*

She realized her drinking had escalated quickly during the pandemic, starting earlier each day. This scared her enough to explore full sobriety. What she discovered transformed her life:<sup>13</sup>

*"I look at what has happened because of my sobriety and because of putting down alcohol, and another part of why I'm so passionate about this is because I see this with my clients as well, that the blocks that we have in our life, the challenges that we're going through, we think alcohol is helping, and it's actually hindering us in so many ways.*

*And when we remove alcohol, sometimes that is the one catalyst that we need in order to improve our physical health, our mental health, our relationships, our careers, our financials, all of the things that are a struggle."*

## Strategies for Reducing or Eliminating Alcohol

For those interested in exploring life with less (or no) alcohol, Scheller offered several helpful suggestions:<sup>14</sup>

- 1. Get curious and educate yourself** – Read books, listen to podcasts and learn about the health impacts of alcohol.
- 2. Find community support** – Scheller runs an online community called the Functional Sobriety Network. There are many other support groups and resources available as

well.

- 3. Examine your social media** – Unfollow accounts that glamorize drinking and follow sober influencers instead.
- 4. Address the root causes** – Look at why you drink – stress, social pressure, habit – and find healthier alternatives.
- 5. Support your body nutritionally** – Supplements like L-theanine, L-glutamine, NAC, B-complex vitamins and milk thistle can help with cravings and support detoxification.
- 6. Stabilize blood sugar** – Increasing protein intake and eating regularly helps reduce alcohol cravings.
- 7. Be open about your choice** – Scheller encourages people to simply say they're not drinking for their health if asked.

One of the most powerful shifts Scheller advocates for is changing how you think about alcohol in your life in order to reframe your relationship with drinking:<sup>15</sup>

*"Previously, the only people who did quit drinking were people that identified themselves as having a problem or maybe had to quit. And so the first thing I'll say if you're listening and you're interested is you don't have to have a problem to decide that you want to explore this. You don't need to even be that regular of a drinker for you to say, 'You know what? This is something I may want to explore.'"*

In other words, choosing not to drink is a positive, empowering decision for your health – not a punishment or deprivation.

## **The Bigger Picture: Optimizing Mitochondrial Health**

I'll admit, before diving into this research, I bought into many of the common myths about alcohol. I thought having a drink or two occasionally was relatively harmless,

maybe even beneficial. Now, I see things very differently.

I used to drink alcohol a few times a year. Now, since I've learned this information, I don't drink any alcohol at all. I encourage everyone reading this to seriously reevaluate their relationship with alcohol. Look at the research yourself. Consider whether the fleeting pleasure of a drink is worth the very real damage it causes to your body.

This deeper understanding of alcohol's impact ties into my broader research on what truly drives health and longevity: mitochondrial function. In my upcoming book, "Your Guide to Cellular Health: Unlocking the Science of Longevity and Joy," I explore how optimizing your mitochondria is the key to preventing and reversing chronic disease.

Alcohol is just one of several major factors that damage mitochondria and accelerate aging. Others include excess omega-6 fats, electromagnetic field (EMF) exposure and endocrine-disrupting chemicals. By eliminating these harmful inputs and supporting your cellular health, you can dramatically improve your vitality and lifespan.

## **A Cultural Shift in the Making**

Scheller and I both believe we're at the beginning of a major cultural shift in how we view alcohol – similar to the changing attitudes around smoking in previous decades. As more people recognize the true health impacts of drinking, choosing an alcohol-free lifestyle will likely become increasingly common and accepted.

This shift won't happen overnight, but each person who decides to cut back or quit contributes to changing the narrative. As Scheller put it:<sup>16</sup>

*"We need to be more loud and bold about it. It's, again, a big reason why in my experience, I didn't feel like I wanted to be someone who lived in the shadows about this, who was anonymous about this topic, because it is time for a change. We are on the precipice, I think, of a cultural shift around it, and it's up to each of us to take that step for ourselves and for our lives."*



# A Call to Rethink Your Relationship with Alcohol

I'm more convinced than ever that alcohol has no place in a truly health-optimized lifestyle. The risks far outweigh any perceived benefits or momentary pleasure. I encourage you to take an honest look at your own drinking habits. Could reducing or eliminating alcohol improve your health, energy and overall quality of life? The research strongly suggests it would.

Remember, you don't need to label yourself an alcoholic or hit rock bottom to decide that drinking less is a positive choice. "Your health and wellness is a perfectly good excuse for you to say, 'Hey, I'm not drinking right now,' or, 'I'm trying to cut back because I know that it's having a negative effect on my health,'" Scheller said.<sup>17</sup>

I encourage you to explore some of the resources Scheller mentioned, including her book "How to Eat to Change How You Drink" or her Functional Sobriety Network. Educate yourself on the true impacts of alcohol and consider what life might be like with less of it – or none at all.

Your future self – with better health, clearer thinking and quite possibly a longer lifespan – will thank you for making this change. Let's work together to create a culture where choosing not to drink is seen as the smart, health-conscious decision it truly is.

## Sources and References

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