

Alcohol Consumption

Discussing potential risks for informed decisions in breast cancer survivors

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BACKGROUND: Alcohol consumption is a known risk factor for breast cancer. Because breast cancer survivors are already at risk for recurrence, it is important to understand whether these survivors could benefit from survivor-specific recommendations for alcohol consumption.

OBJECTIVES: The purpose of this article was to review primary research specific to alcohol and breast cancer survivors to see whether those who consume alcohol experience more adverse effects.

METHODS: This literature review examined nine cohort studies specific to breast cancer survivors, alcohol consumption, and risks for breast cancer recurrence, breast cancer-specific mortality, and second primary breast cancers.

FINDINGS: Current guideline recommendations of a safe limit of one drink per day or less may not protect breast cancer survivors from cancer-related adverse events. The authors recommend that breast cancer survivors be educated about the associated risks of alcohol consumption so that they can make informed decisions about usage.

KEYWORDS

alcohol consumption; breast cancer; survivorship; recurrence

DIGITAL OBJECT IDENTIFIER

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BREAST CANCER IS THE MOST COMMON CANCER AMONG WOMEN worldwide, with more than 280,000 new breast cancer cases expected to be diagnosed in 2021 (Ferlay et al., 2019; Siegel et al., 2021). With the advances made in breast cancer treatments, more women with breast cancer have achieved remission, and it is estimated that there were more than 3.8 million breast cancer survivors living in the United States as of 2019 (DeSantis et al., 2019). When caring for this large population of breast cancer survivors, healthcare providers need to be aware of survivorship-specific recommendations when counseling patients, such as recommendations regarding health behaviors, including alcohol consumption among breast cancer survivors.

The discussion of safe amounts of alcohol consumption has been challenging for several reasons. First, the research shows that alcohol consumption is associated with primary breast cancer, with each additional drink per day increasing the risk for breast cancer by 7%–10% (American Cancer Society [ACS], 2020; Latino-Martel et al., 2016). Some researchers also indicate that alcohol may be a possible tumor promoter, which increases the risk of developing breast cancer (Brooks & Zakhari, 2015; Pflaum et al., 2016). Second, because alcohol is a known carcinogen that increases circulating estrogen, one might presume that breast cancer survivors who consume alcohol are also at a higher risk for cancer recurrence (Pflaum et al., 2016). Guidelines recommend that women either eliminate or limit alcohol consumption to one drink or less per day to reduce their risk of developing primary breast cancer (ACS, 2020; American Institute for Cancer Research [AICR], 2021a; National Comprehensive Cancer Network [NCCN], 2021a). However, there have also been several studies suggesting that light alcohol consumption benefits cardiovascular health, making decisions about alcohol recommendations more complicated (de Gaetano & Constanzo, 2017). Based on the differing results of previous studies, current survivorship guidelines recommend that survivors limit alcohol consumption to one drink per day or less (NCCN, 2021b; Runowicz et al., 2016).

It is important for healthcare providers to be aware of the evidence for best practice recommendations regarding safe amounts of alcohol for breast cancer survivors because people with a history of breast cancer are at risk of recurrence or developing a second primary breast cancer. The risk of distant