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9 March 2016

Ms Sylvia Lam
The Chairman, Hong Kong Dietitians Association
P.O. Box No. 73916
Kowloon Central Post Office
Kowloon, Hong Kong

Dear Ms Lam,

Alcohol Causes rather than Prevents Cancer

It has come to our attention that a recent local newspaper had mistakenly reported drinking red wine as a means of preventing colorectal cancer. I am deeply concerned that the report was said to be based on an interview with a dietitian.

Alcohol is one of the most well-established causes of cancer in human. Ethanol in alcoholic beverages and its metabolite acetaldehyde are classified as Group 1 carcinogens, same grouping as asbestos, smoking and ionizing radiation. This has been strongly supported by scientific evidence in human and experimental animals, according to the International Agency for Research on Cancer of the World Health Organization.

Epidemiologic studies clearly shows that alcohol drinking can cause cancers of colorectum, oral cavity, pharynx (excluding nasopharynx), larynx, oesophagus, liver and female breasts. The heavier is the drinking, the greater is the risk. For example, moderate drinking (consuming 2 to 3 drinks, or 12.6g - 49.9g of ethanol per day) and heavy drinking (consuming ≥ 4 drinks, or ≥ 50 g of ethanol per day) were found to be associated with a 21% and 52% increased risk of colorectal cancer respectively, compared to no or occasional drinking.¹

¹ Fedirko V, Tramacere I, Bagnardi V, et al. Alcohol drinking and colorectal cancer risk: an overall and dose-response meta-analysis of published studies. *Ann Oncol* 2011; 22(9):1958-72.

While some people may like to think that resveratrol in red wine is health protective due to its antioxidant effect, as health professionals, we should get the facts right. There remains today a lack of evidence that resveratrol prevents cancer in human, and the resveratrol content in red wine is typically much lower than what has been shown experimentally to give health benefits. Resveratrol is not exclusively found in red wine but exists in peanuts, grapes and berries. So, an advice for people to consume red wine for its unproven health benefit when it poses primarily carcinogens, calories and water, is misleading and unprofessional.


When it comes to cancer risk, there is NO safe level for alcohol consumption. Regular alcohol use, even consumed in small amounts, increases the risk of dying from cancer. The safe and sound advice is therefore to **avoid alcohol consumption**.

Many of the risk factors for colorectal cancer are linked to diet and lifestyle habits. Apart from not drinking, we recommend the public to prevent or reduce the risk by:

- increasing the intake of dietary fibre, such as fibre from whole grains, pulses, fruits and vegetables;
- reducing the consumption of red and processed meat, e.g. sausages, ham, bacon and luncheon meat;
- doing at least 150 minutes of moderate-intensity aerobic physical activities per week, e.g. brisk walking, dancing, swimming, performing household tasks, cycling;
- maintaining an optimal body weight and waist circumference (aim for a body mass index between 18.5 and 22.9kg/m², and a waist circumference of <90cm (36 inches) for men and <80cm (32 inches) for women); and
- not smoking and avoiding second hand smoking.

Alcohol has never been proven and should not be promoted for cancer prevention. We kindly request you to share these facts with fellow members and invite them to join us in delivering correct and science-based messages about drinking to our citizens.

Yours sincerely,


(Dr Eddy Ng)
for Director of Health



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