



T’is the Season to be Jolly....Confused

OPINION: The other weekend National Crate Day exhorted drinkers to celebrate the first day of summer by ‘getting on it’ with friends and, of course, a crate. And in The Herald today is advice about the best food s to eat to avoid a hangover.

Then there’s another recent Herald article about what to alcohol to drink to avoid hangovers (you’d think the answer to this would be self-evident but at least the article said drink some water in between other products!). Still more coverage on drinking reminds us that alcohol is a Group 1 Carcinogen – in the same camp as tobacco (it doesn’t say, however, that Group 1 carcinogens are a list of things that increase the relative risk of some cancers and includes things like sunlight).

Then there are those that point out that drinking too much over Christmas could add to your waistline and the Police chip in with the statement ‘Know Your Limit’ – although they don’t tell you what this might be.

So between National Crate Day, avoiding hangovers and keeping trim what’s the truth about the way we’re drinking in New Zealand. Our biggest problem seems to lie not in individual products but in the speed at which we drink – simply put we drink too quickly.

Drink too fast and bad things start to happen quickly as well so to avoid this we have to learn to pace ourselves more effectively and this is where food and water come in as well as a healthy game of backyard cricket or two. But then there’s the question of how much to drink to stay safe and sociable.

This is tricky because it changes depending on things like family health history, gender, age and other lifestyle choices like smoking, diet and exercise (and if you’re at all worried about the impact of alcohol on you or a loved one make sure you talk to your GP).

Credible, repeated studies say the same thing however – if you’re basically pretty healthy then drinking between one and three standard drinks a day means you accrue a range of health benefits and tend to live longer than those that do not drink at all¹. Drink more than this then, over the long term, the benefits reverse and the risk of you getting some cancers increase in line with your alcohol consumption.

¹ See for example - Mostofsky et al., 2016, Key findings on alcohol consumption and a variety of health outcomes from the Nurses’ Health Study. American Journal of Public Health, Published early online 26 July

Funnily enough this level of safe consumption is pretty much what the Ministry of Health recommends in its drinking guidelines.²

And lastly official Ministry of Health statistics are revealing³ – most of us are actually drinking less overall and less hazardously – particularly younger drinkers. In fact about 80% of us drink moderately and responsibly which leaves one in five who don't.

This is cause for celebration – right? Well yes – and no.

Yes because the fact that we're increasingly drinking more responsibly is a good thing – and no because out of the 20% who drink hazardously young men and women are still overrepresented. So even though the figures are getting better there is still more to do to change our drinking culture.

So don't get confused over summer - don't drink an entire crate in one go and don't get hungover. Instead, as my mother said to me when I was growing up – everything in moderation – eat well, exercise a bit and, if you choose to drink over Christmas and New Year, drink moderately.

ENDS

Robert Brewer is Chief Executive of industry association Spirits New Zealand and is a Board member of The Tomorrow Project – a joint industry-funded charity established in 2012 with the objective of helping to create a moderate drinking culture by providing the facts, tools and experiences drinkers need to stay safe and sociable when they're drinking (see www.cheers.org.nz). The Tomorrow Project partners are the Brewers Association of Australia and New Zealand, Spirits New Zealand and New Zealand Winegrowers.

² <http://www.health.govt.nz/your-health/healthy-living/addictions/alcohol-and-drugs/alcohol>

³ <http://www.health.govt.nz/nz-health-statistics/national-collections-and-surveys/surveys/current-recent-surveys/new-zealand-health-survey#published>