

Alcohol linked to 1 in 5 breast cancers

Barbara Miller from ABC Radio AM reported this story on [Monday, May 2, 2011](#) 08:18:00

Alternate [WMA version](#) | [MP3 download](#)

PETER CAVE: Alcohol, it seems, is a much bigger contributor to cancer than previously thought.

The Cancer Council says the latest evidence suggests that drinking is a cause of 5 per cent of all cancer cases in Australia. That figure rises to more than 20 per cent of breast cancer cases.

The Cancer Council's chief executive Professor Ian Olver spoke to Barbara Miller.

IAN OLVER: The evidence of the link between alcohol and cancer is very strong. Originally we had linked alcohol with rather rarer cancers like liver and head and neck cancer, but the newer data links it with very common cancers, bowel cancer, and surprisingly to us breast cancer - surprising because over a fifth of breast cancers are thought to have alcohol as a risk factor.

BARBARA MILLER: As a risk factor or a cause?

IAN OLVER: Well, it is a cause. The population studies show the association and then the possible mechanisms are worked out and we know that alcohol does interfere with the balance of female hormones so there is a very strong link with how it could cause something like breast cancer but we didn't expect it to be quite that high and you know, if you had strong family history of breast cancer then at least you need to know what else you could do to reduce your risk.

BARBARA MILLER: Is it true to say alcohol causes cancer?

IAN OLVER: It is absolutely true. It is what we call a class one carcinogen so it is just as likely to cause cancer as tobacco or asbestos.

BARBARA MILLER: Is it possible to say if I reduce my drinking from four glasses of wine a night to two glasses that I therefore more or less halve my risk?

IAN OLVER: I think population figures, it is always hazardous to actually translate them to each individual but there is no doubt that in general, yes, you would reduce your risk of breast cancer by reducing your alcohol consumption because the risk actually goes up with the amount that you drink.

I mean it is like everything else. There is a balance here and that's why when the NHMRC (National Health and Medical Research Council) came out and said look, two standard drinks a day is probably relatively safe, we would agree with that. I mean the risk is probably quite small with just a couple of drinks a day.

BARBARA MILLER: But if you say today, look alcohol is a strong contributing factor to cancer but it is okay, you can still have a couple of drinks a day, don't you worry that people

won't modify their behaviour at all?

IAN OLVER: Well, I think the real worry is if they don't know it all they won't have the chance to modify their behaviour and over time I think if we given them accurate information and we try and interpret it in a reasonable way.

So we don't want to scare people because it's a very widespread part of society but we want to put it into some perspective so that they know that this is a, like other things like tobacco, like being overweight, like you know, being out in the sun and so on, there are risks with all these things of cancer and they can take steps to change those risks.

PETER CAVE: Professor Ian Olver, the chief executive of the Cancer Council speaking to Barbara Miller.