- Drinking of alcoholic beverages

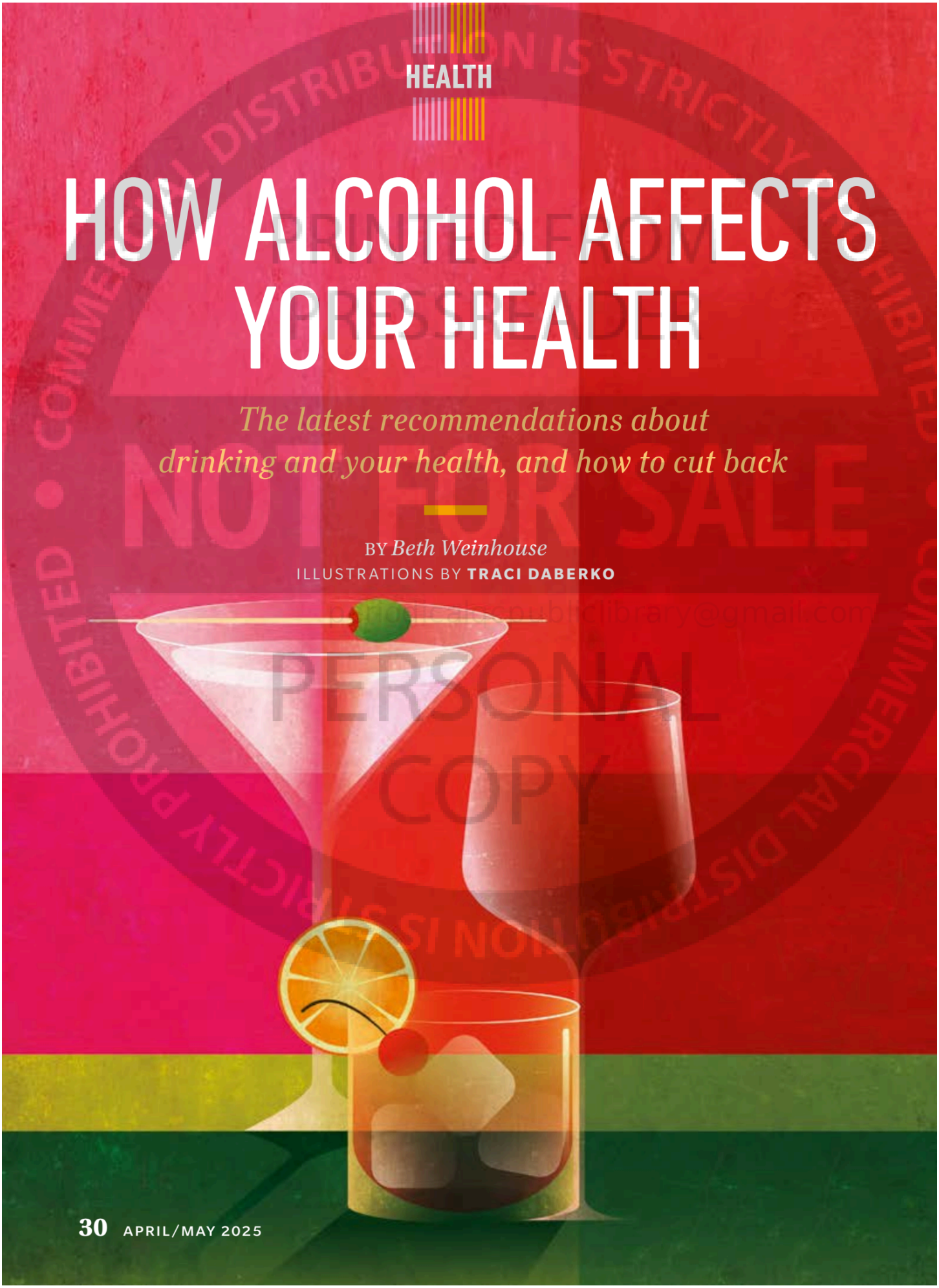
HEALTH

HOW ALCOHOL AFFECTS YOUR HEALTH

The latest recommendations about drinking and your health, and how to cut back

BY *Beth Weinhouse*

ILLUSTRATIONS BY **TRACI DABERKO**



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Over the last few years there's been a trend happening: more people are interested in cutting down or cutting out alcohol completely. More and more of us are choosing to toast with a mocktail or a glass of soda and lime, as new studies show that alcohol's effects on the body may be even more harmful than previously thought.

"People are starting to recognise the hazards of drinking and question their own alcohol use. We're wondering, *do we need alcohol in our lives?*" says addiction specialist Dr Reham Attia.

What Booze Does Inside The Body

Most people are aware that alcohol affects the brain, can damage the liver and can affect a pregnant woman's developing baby. But that's not all the havoc it can wreak.

"Because alcohol is water-soluble and disseminates through the entire body, there's not a single organ that's not affected by heavy alcohol use," says Dr Attia.

Here are just some of the negative health effects drinking has on your body, according to the US National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA):

Brain Alcohol affects the brain's communication pathways, which can change mood and behaviour, affect coordination and make it harder to think clearly.

Heart Alcohol can raise blood pressure, cause arrhythmias *(irregular heartbeat)* and cardiomyopathy *(a stretching or drooping of the heart muscle)*, and raise the risk of stroke.

Liver Alcohol can lead to liver diseases such as steatosis *(fatty liver)* alcoholic hepatitis, fibrosis *(scar tissue that's formed when the liver tries to repair damaged tissue)* and cirrhosis *(permanent damage from scar tissue)*. The liver is probably more affected because the way we ingest alcohol is through the gastrointestinal system, says Dr Attia. "So it makes sense that the first organs to be affected are the organs of this system: the oesophagus, stomach, liver."

Pancreas Alcohol use can make the organ produce toxins that cause pancreatitis, a dangerous inflammation that impairs the ability of the pancreas to make the substances necessary for proper digestion.

Immune system Drinking too much can weaken the immune system, making the body more susceptible to disease.

Cancer Drinking alcohol regularly over time can raise the risk of several types of cancer, including head and neck cancer, oesophageal cancer, liver cancer, breast cancer and colorectal cancer. The International Agency for Research on Cancer has labelled alcohol a Group 1 carcinogen – like asbestos, radiation and tobacco.

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In addition, drinking has been linked to greater risks of developing osteoporosis and dementia. And recent research is showing that in addition to harming a developing foetus, alcohol use can inhibit fertility for both men and women, making it more difficult to get pregnant.

These effects are just a sample of how alcohol can harm the body. In fact, alcohol is known to contribute to 200-plus health conditions.

Dr Attia says that one thing that most people don't connect with alcohol is mental health. "A lot of times people use alcohol to self-medicate depression and anxiety symptoms. In the short term, it may appear that alcohol is helping. In the long term, it's worsening the problem." Alcohol can also counteract the effect of medications designed to treat anxiety and depression, she adds.

But wait, haven't you read that alcohol, especially red wine, has some positive health benefits?

There is a polyphenol [a type of plant compound] called resveratrol in red wine that is beneficial, says Dr Attia. "It decreases inflammation in the epithelial cells that line the blood vessels. It penetrates the blood/brain barrier and has protective effects. It reduces platelet aggregation and can prevent the formation of blood clots."

But before you grab that bottle of Cabernet, consider that these polyphenols can be found in other substances, like grapes, raspberries and peanuts, or by taking supplements. So even if there is a benefit to red wine, you don't need to drink red wine to get this benefit, she says. "Eat the grapes instead."

Is There A Safe Level Of Drinking?

Considering that alcohol is a risk factor for so many serious health problems, is any amount considered safe? According to the National Health and Medical Research Council, healthy adults should not drink more than ten standard drinks per week and no more than four standard drinks in any one day. Children, those under 18 and pregnant women should not drink alcohol at all.

Other organisations go further. To reduce the lifetime risk of harm caused from alcohol-related disease, Cancer Australia recommends healthy adults drink no more than two standard drinks a day. And the World Health Organization says that "when it comes to alcohol consumption, there is no safe amount that does not affect health."

Dr Attia agrees: "Any drinking is hazardous to the body. There is no safe amount of drinking."

Are You 'Sober Curious'?

In 2018, author Ruby Warrington coined the term 'sober curious' to encourage people to examine their drinking habits in the context of the

rest of their lifestyle. Why, she asks in her 2018 book *Sober Curious*, are so many people eating healthy, exercising, meditating and taking other steps to be healthy, but not really looking at or seeing how their alcohol drinking affects them?

"The purpose of adopting a sober curious lifestyle is to gain a deeper understanding of one's drinking habits, motivations and how alcohol affects wellbeing," explains Kerry Benson, a registered dietitian and the co-creator of the Sober Curious Dietitians website (thesoberdietitians.com). "How this awareness shapes future choices will differ from person to person." Being sober curious doesn't necessarily mean complete abstinence from alcohol, she says, but some people may find, after examining their habits and experimenting with not drinking, that alcohol no longer fits in their lives.

"The first thing that improves is sleep," says Dr Attia. "Most people who drink complain of insomnia."

She says that people will notice they have more energy and feel less anxious. "Blood pressure improves. Cholesterol levels improve. That can happen within 30 days. And because you improve blood pressure and cholesterol, you also lower your risk of cardiovascular disease, meaning heart attack and stroke," she says. People also notice healthy weight loss as well as improvements in their energy and mood, she adds.

Tips To Cut Back Or Stop

It can be difficult to suddenly stop drinking alcohol. The Dry July campaign started in Australia in 2008 with the aim of raising money to assist people with cancer. Its aim is simple: challenge people to give up alcohol for the entire month.

Alcohol-free challenges offer people a structured opportunity to take a break from drinking, says Benson. "These initiatives not only help to destigmatise abstaining from alcohol but also provide a manageable way for individuals to examine their drinking habits," she says.

But you don't have to wait until July to question or change your drinking habits. A great place to start, says Benson, is by practising mindful drinking.

"Observe how alcohol makes you feel as you drink it, as well as the next day, both physically and emotionally," she advises. Think about why you're drinking. Because you feel that you should in a social context? Out of habit? To relax or as a reward? Also, think about the drinks you consume: do you even like the taste?

Benson's top recommendation for cutting back on alcohol is to keep substitutes readily available. These could include non-alcoholic beer or sparkling wine, creative mocktails, flavoured sparkling water or kombucha. "Viewing this transition as an opportunity to explore new flavours rather than giving something up can be empowering," she says.

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Other Tips To Cut-Back

- Don't keep alcohol in your home so you won't be tempted.
- If there's a friend or family member you trust – especially someone who lives with you – share your plan and use this person for support.
- Consider setting specific guidelines and goals for yourself. "For instance, you could establish a monthly budget for alcohol expenses or a maximum number of drinks you will consume on an occasion," says Benson.
- At social events, if you aren't ready to stick to sparkling water, try alternating alcoholic and non-alcoholic drinks or diluting your drinks.

Dr Attia recommends that people talk to their doctor. The recommendations they get for less hazardous drinking levels or giving up alcohol completely can then be tailored to their age, medical condition and medications. R

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