A recent medical journal article answered the question: Does red wine reduce cardiovascular risk? The simple answer is yes. Based on pooling the results from all available studies, moderate daily red wine consumption decreases cardiovascular risk compared with either abstinence or heavy and binge drinking.

Moderate drinkers were defined as consuming an average of one or two red wine drinks per day. Most studies defined "a drink" as 4 to 5 ounces of wine with 12 percent ethanol (alcohol) content.

Combining the results of 26 studies, it was found that moderate wine drinking reduced cardiovascular events starting at two years and lasting up to 24 years of follow up. In those studies that included a comparison to beer drinking, beer also produced a significant risk reduction, although it was smaller.

Daily consumption of red wine ranged from zero to 1,738 ml (nearly 2 quarts) in 176,000 men and women. The average range for most participants was zero to three drinks per day. It was found that there was progressive decrease in heart disease risk as wine intake increased up to 5 ounces per day.

Consuming larger amounts showed a trend toward further reduction up to 25 ounces, but it was not statistically significant.

In another combined group of studies comparing 105,000 men and women, a high dietary intake of flavonoids (present in larger amounts in red wine, chocolate, tea, and other foods) also reduced death from heart disease. This study tried to determine whether the higher flavonoid content in red wine provided additional protection or if the alcohol alone was the significant factor. However, they were unable to make any conclusions.

In a summary of 41 studies involving heavy alcohol drinking (greater than 4 drinks per day), there was an increased risk of stroke, which could be as high as 6.5 times that of the general population. This included both types of stroke - those that bleed and those that have a blocked blood supply. No increased risk of stroke was found in light to moderate drinkers.

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services warns people against drinking if they are susceptible to the harmful effects of alcohol or if they are to be involved in any activities that require attention, skill or coordination. At the same time, they recognize that moderate daily wine intake, which they define as 5 oz. for women and 10 oz. for men, was associated with lower heart disease including death. The American Heart Association states that moderate alcohol consumption may be considered safe. The National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism notes that moderate drinkers are less likely to die from coronary artery disease, but it recommends against non-drinkers starting to drink any alcohol solely to benefit their hearts.

Since we are in the full swing of the holiday season, it would appear prudent to follow the adage of "all things in moderation." Some red wine or alcohol may actually be of benefit to the heart, but too much will be harmful in many ways.

Dr. John L. Pfenninger's column appears on Sundays. His office, Medical Procedures Center, is located in Midland.