

Resveratrol, Wine & Aging

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It's not the alcohol in red wine that helps your heart – it's the bioflavonoids, naturally occurring compounds that confer health benefits. If you eat your vegetables and fruits, you get hundreds of them, with a wide variety of chemical structures and different effects in the body.

The bioflavonoid resveratrol resides in red grape skins, makes its way into wine and is credited with much of red wine's protective effect against heart attacks. Berries, plums and peanuts also contain resveratrol.

Latching on to one component or food (especially an alcoholic one) to the exclusion of myriad others seems to be a human trait (remember carotene and oat bran?). Since some studies find benefit with white wine, resveratrol and red grape skins can't be the only healthy parts of grapes.

But resveratrol is identifiable and marketable, so it has found its way into supplements. Why should we eat grapes, berries, plums and peanuts when we can eat a pill? No matter that there is no guarantee of purity and content.

Resveratrol boosts enzymes involved in aging. In animal studies these enzymes (named sirtuin) translate into longer life, delayed age-related decline in heart function and improved sugar metabolism, bone density and motor coordination. Calorie restriction does all those things too, but that's not as popular as a pill and makes no one any money.

We don't have human studies of resveratrol alone, but that hasn't stopped the supplement industry from marketing it. Pills contain 20-500 mg per tablet or capsule. Animal studies used resveratrol doses that would translate (for a 150 pound person) to 350-1450 mg/day. Wine has less than 40 mg/liter. Since drinking a moderate amount of wine helps the heart with such a small amount of resveratrol, there must be other healthy components in the bottle.

Becoming a lush in order to ingest more resveratrol would just be an excuse to get drunk. Too much alcohol from wine damages the heart, leading to heart failure. You wouldn't have a heart attack, but you would die early nonetheless.

Instead, eat plenty of berries, grapes, plums and peanuts. Even better, replace empty calorie foods with these and a variety of vegetables and fruits and perhaps live even longer.