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Drinking Alcohol During a Rich Meal Slows Down Digestion, but Doesn't Increase Indigestion, Study Finds

People can be reassured that while alcohol may slow down digestion after a rich calorific meal, enjoyed by many during the Christmas season, it will not cause indigestion symptoms such as heartburn, belching and bloating, finds research in the Christmas issue published in the British Medical Journal.

In order to determine the effects of alcohol on the digestive system when rich meals are consumed, investigators at the University Hospital of Zurich, led by Dr Mark Fox now at the Queens Medical Centre in Nottingham, studied 20 individuals who either drank wine or black tea with cheese fondue followed by cherry liqueur or water as a digestive after the famous Swiss dish.

Fox and colleagues say that while they concentrated on fondue the results of their research "can be generalised to address the wider issue of alcohol's effects on digestion and digestive comfort after any large, rich meal of the kind we all enjoy over the festive season."

Twenty healthy volunteers (14 male and six female) aged between 23 and 58 took part in the study. None of the participants had a history of alcohol misuse or stomach disease. They had an average body mass index of 23.6 and none were taking prescription medicine.

The participants were tested on two days at least one week apart. Half of the group drank white wine with their

fondue and the other half drank black tea. This was followed by a cherry liqueur digestive (schnapps) or water 90 minutes later.

The research team used established scientific breath tests to assess the effects of alcohol consumption on the digestive system.

The results show that the process of digestion was much slower in the group that drank alcohol with their fondue. However the results also demonstrate that alcohol did not contribute to an increase in indigestion problems such as heartburn, belching and bloating.

The authors conclude that "healthy readers should be reassured that they can continue to enjoy this traditional meal with the beverage of their choice without undue concern about postprandial digestive discomfort".

Henriette Heinrich et al. Effect on gastric function and symptoms of drinking wine, black tea, or schnapps with a Swiss cheese fondue: randomised controlled crossover trial. *BMJ*, 2010; 341:c6731 DOI: 10.1136/bmj.c6731