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Illinois Church Action on Alcohol & Addiction Problems

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The benefits of ‘Dry January’ last longer than a month, studies show

Every year, tens of thousands of people kick off the new year by taking part in a month-long sobriety challenge known as “Dry January.”

The event is widely viewed as a temporary test of willpower — followed by a return to old drinking habits when the month ends. But according to research, that’s often not what happens.

Studies show that people who participate in Dry January and other sobriety challenges frequently experience lasting benefits. Often, they drink less in the long run and make other sustained changes to their drinking habits that lead to striking improvements in their health and well-being.

“It becomes a reinforcing message instead of a punishing message,” he said. “Instead of public health people wagging their fingers and saying, ‘Don’t drink, it’s bad for you,’ people do it and say, ‘I didn’t realize how good I would feel.’ They often don’t realize how much stopping drinking will improve their sleep, or their concentration, or even just their levels of energy in the morning.”

From ‘hazardous’ to ‘low risk’

In one study **published in BMJ Open**, a team of researchers in London and the United States recruited a group of 94 healthy

men and women who were willing to give up alcohol for one month. They compared them to a similar control group of 47 people who continued drinking. Both groups consisted of people who were moderate to heavy drinkers, drinking on average about 2.5 drinks a day.

The researchers found that the people who gave up alcohol for one month had significant improvements in their metabolic health, despite making little or no changes to their diets, smoking or exercise levels. On average they lost about four and a half pounds, their blood pressure dropped, and they had a “dramatic” reduction in their levels of insulin resistance, a marker for Type 2 diabetes risk. They also experienced sharp reductions in cancer-related growth factors — a particularly important finding, the researchers noted, because even low levels of alcohol consumption can increase the risk of many cancers. None of these improvements were seen in the control group.

The researchers followed up with the study participants six to eight months later to see how they were doing. The group that was abstinent for one month had maintained a “significant reduction” in their alcohol consumption, while the control group did not. **Using a screening tool** that can identify problematic drinking behaviors, the researchers determined that the abstinence group’s drinking habits had changed from “hazardous” to “low-risk,” while the control group’s habits stayed about the same.

Saving money and better sleep

In a **separate series of studies**, de Visser and his colleagues followed thousands of Dry January participants to see if the challenge would lead to long-lasting changes. They found that in general, people who took part in Dry January were still drinking considerably less the following August.

On average, the number of days on which they drank fell from 4.3 days per week before the challenge to 3.3 days per week a half-year later. The amount that they drank on each occasion fell and they got drunk less frequently.

Before Dry January, they got drunk an average of 3.4 times per month. But by the following August that figure had fallen to 2.1 times per month.

Most people who take part in sobriety challenges return to drinking afterward. But many are surprised by the benefits they experience during their month of abstinence. De Visser and his colleagues found that most of the Dry January participants they

studied reported saving money, sleeping better, losing weight, and having more energy and a better ability to concentrate. Most also reported that they felt a sense of achievement and gained more control over their drinking. Even people who did not stay alcohol-free the entire month of January reported these benefits.

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