

## Cheers!

Drinking alcohol during treatment may not be as taboo as you think.

### FOR PATIENTS

undergoing physically and emotionally challenging cancer treatment, a cocktail may seem like something fun to look forward to at the end of a long day.

Provided you only indulge in a single drink, for some, it can be, says Dr. Theodore Pollock, DO, FACOI, Director of Medical Oncology and Vice Chief of Staff at Cancer Treatment Centers of America® (CTCA) in Tulsa, Oklahoma.

"I usually say that if patients want to have a glass of wine in the evening or a beer after

cutting the lawn, they can have one a day," Dr. Pollock says. "But I mention the importance of moderation—2 ounces of Scotch a day, not a bottle."

There's a difference between enjoying a glass of wine and depending on one to get through the day. "I don't like to see patients use alcohol or tranquilizers to help them relax," says Dr. Pollock. "That becomes kind of a crutch." Alcohol, when abused, can lead to addiction. Moderation is extremely important and, if you think you might be addicted to alcohol, it's

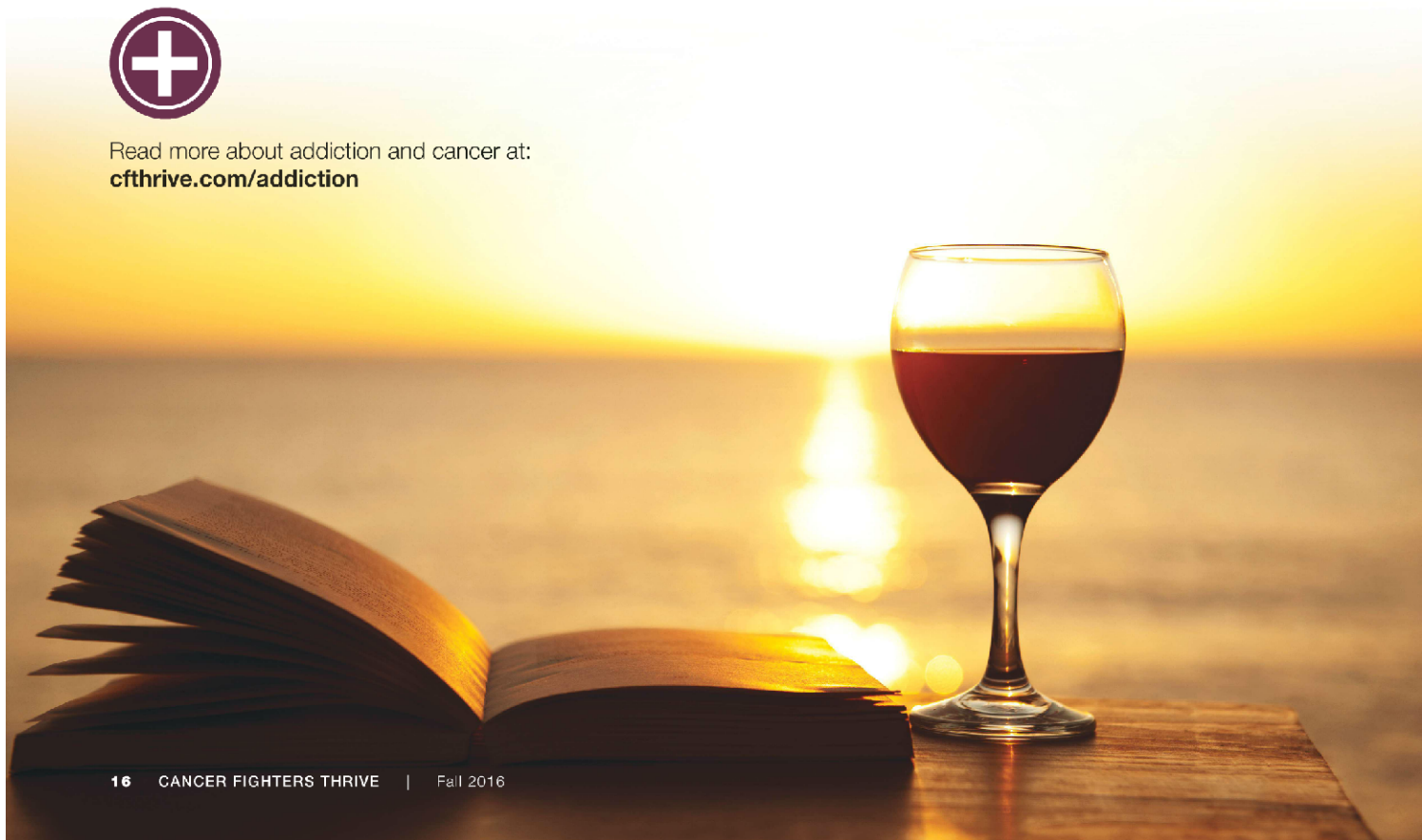
important to talk to your doctor and seek support, Dr. Pollock says.

Frequent alcohol use can prove problematic for cancer patients. Alcohol can cause dehydration, which can lead to reduced urine production. Chemotherapy drugs that are mainly excreted through the kidneys will then remain in the system longer, potentially causing toxicity.

Alcohol can also have a toxic effect on bone marrow, and so having three or four drinks a day can reduce white blood cell production. Those



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cells are necessary to fight off infection—and you may already have fewer than usual because of chemotherapy, says Dr. Pollock.

Patients with particular health conditions—such as liver problems—should avoid even moderate alcohol use, according to Dr. Bert O’Neil, medical oncologist at the IU Health Simon Cancer Center in Indianapolis, Indiana.

“I try to make sure my patients understand the physical effects,” Dr. O’Neil says. “I’m not judging them; they just need to know what it will do.” He adds, because of nausea or other side effects, you might not actually enjoy what once was your favorite beverage.

“A lot of chemotherapy drugs induce taste change, and a lot of cancers are associated with a change in taste before a patient even starts treatment,” he says. “People may try alcohol and find they don’t enjoy it anymore.”

### DON'T MIX DRINKS

Patients taking certain drugs should avoid alcoholic beverages. Some strong narcotic drugs, like morphine, should never be mixed with alcohol. Other adverse combinations may be less obvious. The amino acids in beer and wine, for example, can increase the toxicity of chemotherapy drugs like procarbazine, sometimes used to treat Hodgkin’s disease, Dr. Pollock says.

If drug interactions, pre-existing circumstances and other factors aren’t a concern, in some instances, moderate alcohol use during treatment may actually provide at least one notable positive effect.

According to the National Cancer Institute<sup>1</sup>, up to half of cancer patients have trouble sleeping at some point during treatment. When one of Dr. Pollock’s patients is struggling with insomnia, he occasionally suggests

having a glass of red wine about an hour before bed.

“Alcohol, when not abused, is a safe drug that’s been used for decades,” he says. “And it has a lot fewer side effects than some of the sleeping agents that are marketed today, which can create an altered mental status. Some people can even have hallucinations or sleepwalk using over-the-counter drugs.”

An occasional glass of wine should not have any negative impact on most cancer treatment outcomes, says Dr. Pollock. At a time when you need all the positivity you can get, however, eliminating a daily routine that you look forward to, like a beer after work, could.

Be aware, though, that studies note a correlation between drinking alcohol and increased risk for developing breast cancer.<sup>2</sup> In addition, wine obviously should not be consumed by patients taking narcotic analgesics and certain drugs, such as procarbazine.

If you would like to have an occasional drink, check with your physician first and ask about potential interactions and what to know about how a drink might impact your specific treatment. ●

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.cancercenter.com/community/newsletter/article/addressing-sleep-problems-in-cancer-patients/>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.cancer.gov/about-cancer/causes-prevention/risk/alcohol/alcohol-fact-sheet>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.cancer.org/treatment/survivorshipduringandaftertreatment/nutritionforpeoplewithcancer/nutrition-and-physical-activity-during-and-after-cancer-treatment-answers-to-common-questions>

<sup>4</sup> <http://archinte.jamanetwork.com/article.aspx?articleid=1809754>

## SQUASH STRESS

Stress during and after cancer treatment is real. Here are four ways to relax and unwind without drinking alcohol.

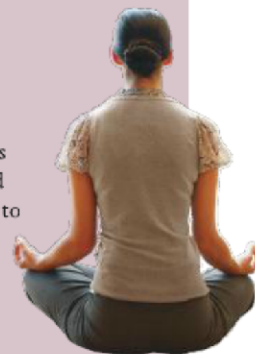
### 1. WORK OUT

According to the American Cancer Society<sup>3</sup>, moderate exercise has been shown to reduce fatigue and anxiety. “I always stress the importance of physical activity to all patients on chemotherapy,” says Dr. Pollock. Ask your doctor what kinds of exercises are safe for you.



### 2. GET ZEN

Dr. O’Neil recommends meditation, a practice that a 2014 Johns Hopkins University study<sup>4</sup> found has an effect on depression and anxiety that is comparable to antidepressants.



### 3. SHIFT FOCUS

Concentrating on work or hobbies can help you avoid treatment-induced tension, according to Dr. O’Neil.

### 4. CULTIVATE CALM

Mind-body therapies can go a long way toward reducing stress. “We use evidence-based, integrative therapies at CTCA, including acupuncture and massage therapy, to help patients get over extreme periods of stress,” Dr. Pollock says.

