

Excessive drinking harms liver

When Debbie Collins' wedding ceremony at Sacred Heart of Mary, Graceland Park, concludes June 23, the 26-year-old Dundalk resident plans to toast her nuptials with a sip of champagne.

Though she knows that excessive alcohol consumption can be harmful to the liver, the soon-to-be bride isn't concerned about the effects of the mouthful of sparkling wine and the one Amaretto & Sprite she plans to drink at her wedding reception.

As a gymnastics coach and a former champion gymnast, the toned and athletic Ms. Collins appears to be the picture of fitness and health, and the fact that she consumes one or two alcoholic beverage per week separates her from some of her harder-partying 20-something contemporaries.

Ms. Collins' limited alcohol consumption shouldn't pose any health risks, said Dr. Nina Nelson-Garrett, a gastroenterologist at Good Samaritan Hospital in Northeast Baltimore.

"The casual drinker - someone who consumes one or two glasses of wine daily - tends not to have any severe side effects," Dr. Nelson-Garrett said, "unless they have other underlying liver problems."

It's the excessive drinker that is at risk of developing a fatty liver and possibly a life-threatening liver disease, she said.

"Twenty percent of adults in the U.S. are considered hazardous and harmful drinkers," Dr. Nelson-Garrett said. "These people are not 'dependent' on alcohol, but (they) binge drink or have social or health issues related to alcohol use. Binge drinking is defined as a pattern of consumption that brings the blood alcohol concentration to .08 percent or above, usually brought on by consumption of four or more drinks for males, or three or more drinks for females, in a single occasion over two hours."

According to a Harvard School of Public Health College Alcohol Study, 51 percent of college males and 40 percent of college females consume five or more alcoholic beverages in a row.

Since 1993, the proportion of students who binge drink has remained stable at 44 percent and students most likely to overindulge tend to be white, age 23 or younger and are residents of fraternity or sorority houses, the study concluded.

Harmful effects of alcohol on the liver include fatty liver from alcohol use, alcoholic hepatitis (inflammation of the liver cells), cirrhosis (scarring of the liver), and liver cancer, Dr. Nelson-Garrett said. "More than 2 million Americans suffer from alcohol-related liver disease."

Then there is the issue of heavy drinkers and alcoholics, who tend to suffer from a host of health problems, she said.

While a fatty liver and hepatitis can develop from binge drinking, 10 to 20 percent of heavy drinkers develop alcoholic cirrhosis and repeated injury to the liver can result in liver cancer, Dr. Nelson-Garrett said.

Damage caused by a fatty liver and hepatitis is reversible if the person discontinues drinking alcoholic beverages, she said. "Cirrhosis in and of itself is not reversible, but the liver is able to repair itself by regenerating enough to be a functional liver if alcohol consumption is stopped in some cases. Unfortunately, a liver transplant may be needed for someone with life-threatening cirrhosis."

The myth that beer and wine is less harmful to the liver than a shot of hard alcohol is simply not true, Dr. Nelson-Garrett said. "The type of alcohol consumed does not make a difference in the long-term effects of alcohol abuse."

The Good Samaritan gastroenterologist also said mixing the pain-killer acetaminophen (Tylenol) with alcohol can, in some cases, lead to serious risks of liver damage.

"Likewise, liver damage from other entities, including genetic disorders, increase the risk for alcohol-related liver injury," she said.

"You hear about all kinds of bad things happening to your liver if you drink too much," Ms. Collins said. "I don't drink that much, so I don't think the little bit at my wedding is going to be a problem for me."