

SOBRIETY CHECK

The Alcohol Industry Is Funding a Landmark Study on Alcohol

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It's not clear if the results will help or harm their larger goals.

Like that ex you dated off and on for years, it seems science really doesn't know how to feel about people getting buzzed.

Sure, it's obvious that heavy drinking is dangerous, both in the short and long term. Every year, there are about [88,000 alcohol-related deaths](#), whether from driving while intoxicated or an overdose, and some 15 million adults have alcohol use disorder. But the jury is far less settled on how light to moderate drinking affects our health, and if it could even be good for us.

Just this past May, a study in mice found a common component in red wine called resveratrol could possibly slow down cognitive decline, as Tonic [reported](#), and other studies in people have similarly suggested benefits from moderate drinking. But for every positive study, you can find plenty where the glass is half empty: May also [featured](#) a report from the American Institute for Cancer Research that found a small increased risk of breast cancer in women who had even one small drink a day.

To help decide this debate, researchers at the National Institutes of Health (NIH) are getting ready to conduct what might be the most extensive study of its kind: A six-year, [\\$100 million clinical trial](#) that will test whether a drink a day is associated with lower rates of heart attacks. Researchers will recruit nearly 8,000 adults aged 50 and older from various corners of the globe and randomly assign them to either have one daily drink (of their choice) or abstain completely. The study will exclude problem drinkers and people

who've never had alcohol. The researchers will then track how each group fares health and heart-wise; specifically, which group has more heart attacks, strokes, and deaths.

Rigorous as this research may seem, though, there are experts who are worried about the alcohol industry's role in it. The *New York Times* notes that two-thirds of the study's funding thus far has come from money given to a foundation set up for the NIH by five of the [largest alcohol companies](#) in the world, including Heineken and Anheuser-Busch InBev; companies that have a vested interest in promoting the idea that alcohol is healthy. Some of the researchers involved also have previous financial ties to the industry.

Many of these scientists, as well as alcohol company representatives, have sworn the industry will have no impact on the NIH trial. "The money from the Foundation for the NIH has no strings attached," George Koob, director of the NIH's Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, told the *Times*. "Whoever donates to that fund has no leverage whatsoever—no contribution to the study, no input to the study, no say whatsoever." The study could completely backfire on the industry, and they'd have to live with it, he said.

"Our role is limited entirely to the funding we provided. We have no role in the study. We will learn the outcome of the study when everybody else does," Gemma R. Hart, vice president for communications Anheuser-Busch, [told](#) the *Times*.

But others who've looked into the effects of industry funding are wary of such promises, even when they're genuinely made. "We should be very cautious about how we interpret findings of studies that are funded by industry," Nicholas Evans, a medical ethicist at the University of Massachusetts Lowell, tells *Tonic*. "This isn't just about nutrition; it's about a much larger trend we see in the relationships between studies and funding interests."

One [review](#), Evans points out, found that research looking at how a certain drug affects the heart was three to five times more likely to be linked to industry money when it was rosy. (Sometimes studies that have negative or lackluster findings don't get published, leading to a phenomenon known as [publication bias](#), wherein all the studies on a certain treatment are positive.) And across a variety of controversial health issues surrounding popular products, from [smoking](#) to [dark chocolate](#), it's become apparent that industry-backed research has muddied the waters, even without meaning to.

"It's easy to point to deliberate malfeasance, but the unintentional distortion of results is always the most insidious," says Carson Benowitz-Fredericks, a public health expert and research manager of the industry watchdog Alcohol Justice.

But both Evans and Benowitz-Fredericks say there are concrete ways to lessen, if not completely get rid of, the unintentional bias that often comes with dark research money—provided scientists are willing.

"What we need to do—as people have been demanding of trials for years now—is ensure that the raw data, measures, and analysis are open to the public at the conclusion of the study," Evans says, so independent scientists can perform their own investigation. Another step is to ensure these studies are pre-registered somewhere, so we can verify the research was conducted as planned (the expected trial is [registered](#) as such in the NIH's database).

"Fundamentally, we'd like to see an environment where good, large-scale alcohol research can be done without turning to industry dollars, using untainted money," Benowitz-Fredericks says. "Someday, we hope."

The Trump administration proposed cutting the NIH's budget for the rest of the year, but thankfully [Congress ignored it](#) and gave the agency even more money. We'll see what happens with Trump's proposed [20 percent cut](#) in NIH funding for 2018.