

Antidepressants help men decrease alcohol consumption, but not women

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CIHR-funded study explored the relationship between use of antidepressants and level of alcohol consumption, examining whether using antidepressants affected the link between depression and level of alcohol consumption. The research conducted by the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH) concluded that women suffering from depression consumed more alcohol than women who did not experience depression, regardless of antidepressant use.

This finding differs significantly from rates found in male counterparts. While men suffering from depression generally consume more alcohol than non-depressed men, those who use antidepressants consume alcohol at about the same level as non-depressed men.

Dr. Kathryn Graham, Senior Scientist with CAMH and Agnes Massak, Ph.D student in the Department of Psychology at the University of Western Ontario, published the study in the *Canadian Medical Association Journal* on February 27, 2007.

"Our results agree with previous clinical research that suggests that the use of antidepressants is associated with lower alcohol consumption among men suffering from depression," said Dr. Graham. "But this does not appear to be true for women."

Overall, participants in the survey experiencing depression (both men and women) drank more alcohol than did non-depressed respondents. However, men taking antidepressants consumed significantly less alcohol

than depressed men who did not use antidepressants. Non-depressed men consumed 436 drinks per year, compared to 579 drinks for depressed men not using antidepressants, and 414 drinks for depressed men who used antidepressants.

Unfortunately for women, the alcohol use remained higher whether those experiencing depression took antidepressants or not. The numbers are telling: 179 drinks per year for non-depressed women, 235 drinks for depressed women not using antidepressants, and 264 drinks for depressed women who used antidepressants

"The fact that the relationship between the use of antidepressants and the level of alcohol consumption is different for men and women points to the importance of taking gender influences and sex differences into consideration in the treatment and prevention of many health conditions," said Dr. Miriam Stewart, Scientific Director for CIHR Institute of Gender and Health. "This type of research reporting significant sex differences helps identify important clues for tailoring interventions."

The scientists behind this study say further research is needed to assess whether this finding is due to drug effects or some other factor.

"We do not know whether antidepressants have different pharmacological effects on men and women, whether depression differs by gender, or whether the differences in the process of being treated for depression account for this discrepancy," mentioned Dr. Graham. "For example, physicians prescribing antidepressants may be more likely to caution men than women about their drinking."

For the study, 14,063 Canadian residents aged 18-76 years were surveyed. The survey included measures of quantity, frequency of drinking, depression and antidepressants use, over the period of a year.

The researchers used data from the GENACIS Canada survey, part of an international collaboration to investigate the influence of cultural variation on gender differences in alcohol use and related problems. CIHR provided over 1.3 million to GENACIS Canada (GENder Alcohol and Culture: an International Study). Over 35 countries and more than 100 leading alcohol and gender researchers are involved in the multinational study.

Every year, 12% of Canadians between the ages of 15 and 64 years suffer from some form of a mental disorder or substance dependence.

Source: Canadian Institutes of Health Research

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