

Living alone is associated with an increased risk of alcohol-related deaths

September 20 2011

Living alone is associated with an increased risk of alcohol-related mortality—from alcohol-related diseases and accidents—according to a Finnish study published in this week's *PLoS Medicine*, suggesting that a lack of social relationships should be regarded as a potential risk factor for death from alcohol related causes. However, the idea that a lack of social relationships is a risk factor for death is still not widely recognised by health professionals, policy makers, or the public.

Researchers led by Kimmo Herttua from the Finnish Institute of Occupational Health, in Helsinki, found a greater increase in alcohol-related deaths (particularly fatal liver disease) among people living alone compared to married and cohabiting people after an alcohol price reduction in 2004, suggesting that people living alone are more vulnerable to the adverse effects of increased alcohol availability.

The authors analyzed information on about 80% of all people who died in Finland between 2000 and 2007 and found that roughly 18,200 people--two-thirds of whom lived alone--died from underlying alcohol-related causes such as liver disease and alcoholic poisoning or contributory alcohol-related factors such as accidents, violence and cardiovascular disease.

Furthermore, for people living alone (particularly those aged 50-69 years) a reduction in the price of alcohol in 2004 was associated with a substantial increase in the alcohol-related mortality rate. For example, between 2000 and 2003, men living alone were 3.7 times as likely to die

of liver disease as married or cohabiting men but between 2004 and 2007, they were 4.9 times as likely to die of [liver disease](#). The pattern of mortality was similar but lower in women living alone.

The authors conclude: "Living alone is associated with a substantially increased risk of alcohol-related [mortality](#), irrespective of gender, socioeconomic status, or the specific cause of death."

They add: "Further longitudinal research is needed to confirm the generalizability of our findings to other countries with different alcohol cultures (e.g., Mediterranean wine culture) and to identify selective and causal processes underlying the association between living alone and [alcohol](#) abuse. "

More information: Herttua K, Martikainen P, Vahtera J, Kivimäki M (2011) Living Alone and Alcohol-Related Mortality: A Population-Based Cohort Study from Finland. PLoS Med 8(9): e1001094. [doi:10.1371/journal.pmed.1001094](https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pmed.1001094)

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