

# Binge drinking increases the risk of cognitive decline in older adults

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Researchers from the Peninsula College of Medicine and Dentistry (PCMD), University of Exeter, will present the findings of a new study suggesting a link between binge drinking in older adults and the risk of developing dementia.

The findings are to be presented at the Alzheimer's Association International Conference 2012, the world's largest gathering of dementia researchers, in Vancouver, Canada on 18th July 2012. The work is supported by the National Institute for Health Research Collaboration for Leadership in Applied Health Research and Care in the South West Peninsula (NIHR PenCLAHRC).

Little is known about the [cognitive effects](#) of [binge drinking](#) in [older people](#), which led the PCMD research team to investigate. Dr. Iain Lang from PCMD, who led the study, said: "We know binge drinking can be harmful: it can increase the risk of harm to the [cardiovascular system](#), including the chance of developing heart disease; and it is related to an increased risk of both intentional and unintentional injuries. However, until we conducted our study it was not clear what the effect was of binge drinking on cognitive function and the risk of developing dementia."

The research team analysed data from 5,075 participants aged 65 and older in the Health and Retirement Study (HRS), a biennial, longitudinal, nationally representative survey of U.S. adults, to assess the effects of binge drinking in older people on their function. Initial data were

collected in 2002 and participants were followed for eight years. Consumption of four or more drinks on one occasion was considered binge drinking. Cognitive function and memory were assessed using the Telephone Interview for [Cognitive Status](#).

The research showed binge drinking once a month or more was reported by 8.3 per cent of men and 1.5 per cent of women; binge drinking twice a month or more was reported by 4.3 per cent of men and 0.5 per cent of women.

The researchers found that:

- participants who reported binge drinking at least once a month were 62% more likely to be in the group experiencing the greatest 10% of decline in cognitive function, and 27% more likely to be in the group experiencing the greatest 10% of memory decline.
- participants reporting heavy episodic drinking twice a month or more were two-and-a-half times more likely to be in the group experiencing the greatest 10 per cent of decline in cognitive function and also two-and-a-half times more likely to be in the group experiencing the greatest 10% of decline in memory.

Outcomes were similar in men and women.

"In our group of community-dwelling [older adults](#), binge drinking is associated with an increased risk of cognitive decline," said Dr. Lang. "That's a real worry because there's a proven link between cognitive decline and risk of dementia. Those who reported binge drinking at least twice a month were more than twice as likely to have higher levels of decline in both cognitive function and memory. These differences were present even when we took into account other factors known to be

related to cognitive decline such as age and level of education."

He added: "This research has a number of implications. First, older people – and their doctors – should be aware that binge drinking may increase their risk of experiencing [cognitive decline](#) and encouraged to change their drinking behaviours accordingly. Second, policymakers and public health specialists should know that binge drinking is not just a problem among adolescents and younger adults. We have to start thinking about older people when we are planning interventions to reduce binge drinking."

Provided by The Peninsula College of Medicine and Dentistry

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