

Problem drinking in midlife doubles chance of memory problems in later life

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A study published Wednesday, July 30 in the *American Journal of Geriatric Psychiatry* indicates that middle-aged adults with a history of problem drinking are more than twice as likely to suffer from severe memory impairment in later life.

The study highlights the hitherto largely unknown link between harmful patterns of [alcohol consumption](#) and problems with memory later in life – problems which may place people at a high risk of developing dementia.

The study was carried out by researchers from the University of Exeter Medical School with support from the NIHR Collaboration for Leadership in Applied Health Research and Care South West Peninsula (NIHR PenCLAHRC).

The research team studied the association between a history of alcohol use disorders (AUDs) and the onset of severe cognitive and memory impairment in 6542 middle-aged adults born between 1931 and 1941. These individuals participated in the Health and Retirement Study in the US.

Participants were first assessed in 1992 and follow-up assessments took place every other year from 1996 to 2010.

A history of AUDs was identified using the CAGE* questionnaire (short for Cut down, Annoyed, Guilty, Eye-opener). Where participants

registered a history of AUDs their chances of developing severe memory impairment more than doubled.

The study was led by Dr Iain Lang. He commented: "We already know there is an association between dementia risk and levels of current alcohol consumption – that understanding is based on asking older people how much they drink and then observing whether they develop problems. But this is only one part of the puzzle and we know little about the consequences of alcohol consumption earlier in life. What we did here is investigate the relatively unknown association between having a drinking problem at any point in life and experiencing problems with memory later in life."

He added: "This finding – that middle-aged people with a history of problem drinking more than double their chances of [memory impairment](#) when they are older – suggests three things: that this is a public health issue that needs to be addressed; that more research is required to investigate the potential harms associated with alcohol consumption throughout life; and that the CAGE questionnaire may offer doctors a practical way to identify those at risk of memory/cognitive impairment and who may benefit from help to tackle their relationship with alcohol."

Dr Doug Brown, Director of Research and Development at Alzheimer's Society said:

'When we talk about drinking too much, the media often focuses on young people ending up in A&E after a night out. However, there's also a hidden cost of alcohol abuse given the mounting evidence that alcohol abuse can also impact on cognition later in life. This small study shows that people who admitted to alcohol abuse at some point in their lives were twice as likely to have severe memory problems, and as the research relied on self-reporting that number may be even higher.'

This isn't to say that people need to abstain from alcohol altogether. As well as eating a healthy diet, not smoking and maintaining a healthy weight, the odd glass of red wine could even help reduce your risk of developing dementia.'

The CAGE asks four questions (and the acronym comes from words in each question: Cut down, Annoyed, Guilty, Eye-opener):

1. Have you ever felt you should cut down on your drinking?
2. Have people annoyed you by criticising your drinking?
3. Have you ever felt bad or guilty about your drinking?
4. Have you ever had a drink first thing in the morning to steady your nerves or get rid of a hangover (eye-opener)?

Provided by University of Exeter

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