

## Wealthy, male, educated, singletons risk highest alcohol consumption in later life

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A decade long research project into the drinking habits of over 45s has found that rich, educated, single males are at greatest risk of failing to cut their drinking habits in later life.

The ten year study of more than 4,500 men and women over 45 years of age from academics at Keele University and UCL, has identified the drinking habits of [older adults](#) and how these habits changed over a ten year period in reaction to [life](#) course events. The study sought to find how the relationship between alcohol consumption, individual characteristics such as wealth and education and [life events](#) varied for men and women. The life course events studied were for [partnership](#)

[status](#), health, and employment.

The study, which was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, found that single, educated and [wealthy men](#) continue to drink more into later life, while women over 50 cut down their drinking after the loss of a partner.

For women, the end of a partnership is associated with a reduction in how much they drink. From the people studied, women who lost a partner reduced their drinking levels by more than 16% at the end of the ten year study. This was a considerably larger reduction than those in a partnership who saw a drop of little more than 11% during the same period.

Wealthy, educated, healthy single males that used to or still do smoke are the most likely to drink more in later life. Major factors for this greater consumption are likely to be associated with multiple opportunities to socialise, due to a single life, and a disposable income. Those with this profile drank on average an equivalent of 24 small glasses of wine a week at the start of the study. This was in sharp contrast to single, retired men with poor health and no qualifications who drank on average an equivalent of five small glasses of wine a week at the start of the study. The trend that poor health and lower levels of education equals lower alcohol consumption is found for women.

Older people with poor or deteriorating health were found to have the steepest decline in the quantity and frequency of alcohol consumed. This is contrary to the popular belief that high alcohol consumption and poor health go hand in hand. Possible reasons for this include the limits that poor health places on opportunities for social drinking, as well as medical advice about alcohol consumption and interactions with medication.

One additional finding related to health and drinking is that over 50s who had stopped drinking completely at the start of the period of observation and remained in the study were more likely to experience an improvement in health compared to drinkers.

Professor Clare Holdsworth, professor of Social Geography at Keele University and lead researcher on the project, says: "Over the Christmas period many people consume more alcohol. Our findings suggest that the group most at risk of heavy drinking in later life are older single men with high levels of education and above average wealth. Suggesting that health organisations target this group is not necessarily straightforward as these men might not identify their drinking as problem behaviour. Also this group are less likely to have [poor health](#) in the short term, hence the need for intervention might not be apparent.

"Our findings also challenge the assumption that the end of a partnership is associated with alcohol misuse in later life, which has been found in other smaller-scale studies. In particular, our analysis of [drinking](#) behaviours demonstrates that change in partnership status for women is associated with a reduction in [alcohol consumption](#). As a result it is not necessarily appropriate to target alcohol services at this group of older people."

Provided by Keele University

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